

THE HANDSOME
HUMES

WILLIAM BLACK,





THE HANDSOME HUMES

BY
WILLIAM BLACK

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.

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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE PUGILIST'S DAUGHTER	1
II. AT AN OPEN WINDOW	31
III. AN ALLY	59
IV. FIRST PLUNGE AND LAST	88
V. A GULF BETWEEN	118
VI. AVILION	147
VII. SPIES	174
VIII. CONCLUSION	203



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CHAPTER I.

THE PUGILIST'S DAUGHTER.

LIKE to the slow-pulsating throb of the screw of a great steamer at sea, all through the long hours of the night certain words and phrases kept repeating themselves in his brain in a dull mechanical way: things not wholly unconnected either—the designations of the officers who presided over the ancient gymnasia—the names of the different contests and the conditions attached—lines and passages from his favourite Greek authors in laudation of physical prowess and feats of strength and skill, and the like: accompanied by visions, too—now

of the godlike man, Euryalos son of King Mekisteus, about to enter the boxing-ring; now of the heaven-born Polydeuces overthrowing the giant-champion of the Bebryces; again of Simaetha confiding to the Lady Moon the story of her tragic love—of her meeting with Delphis and Eudamippus on their return from ‘the glorious wrestler’s toil’—‘their breasts were brighter of sheen than thyself, Selene!’ For ere he went to sleep this young Fellow of All Souls’ had been valiantly striving to convince himself that a profession and an exercise that his beloved folk of the great days held in high honour might very well be tolerated in these later times; and he was resolving that if this statement about Mr. Summers were true—and several surprising coincidences seemed to point to its truth—he would make no apology, he would take no shame to himself for the alliance he had formed. All this was very fine and heroic; it was at any

rate some little thing he could do for Nan's sake ; and he went to bed comforted.

But when he awoke to the cold light of the new day, matters began to assume a very different, and a very grave aspect. How, for example, was he to introduce an ex-pugilist to all those proud Hays and Humes and their families, or even to some college friend whom he might accidentally meet in town? He had never considered the necessity of introducing Mr. Summers to anybody. Nan's father had so persistently effaced himself and kept himself in the background—placing her forward as the only person to be considered—that Sidney had unconsciously fallen in with this arrangement, as he would have fallen in with any arrangement that secured to him Nan herself, with her musical undertones and her deep-wounding eyes. Nevertheless and undoubtedly marriage would bring him this father-in-law, whatever kind of man he was or might have been ; and the odium with

which the prize-ring is now regarded in England was not to be got over by appeals to the customs of the ancient Greeks. Then Lady Helen—and here his face flushed with vexation—would not Lady Helen smile her placid, inscrutable, patronising smile when she heard that he had married a pugilist's daughter?

And again his mind revolted from this possibility: it was a false and preposterous accusation, and nothing more. Were prize-fighters in the habit of earning sums sufficient to enable them to retire to such a place as Crowhurst, and live there, if not in luxury, at least in easy contentment? It is true that quite recently, in England, America, and Australia, an attempt had been made to galvanise a moribund institution; and matches had been made for large stakes; but the winners of these fights, few in number, were quite well known, and Mr. Summers was not one of them. Had Nan's father—Sidney asked

himself, in this rapid survey of a critical situation—the manners or the appearance of a pugilist? Was not the typical pugilist a low-browed, broken-nosed, crop-haired person, wearing sham diamond rings and wide-checked trousers, a frequenter of public-houses and mean gambling-hells, occasionally the buffoon and attendant of some microcephalous peer? And had not Dick Erridge distinctly stated that Mr. Summers had been a trainer of race-horses, which was in a rough-and-ready way a sufficiently respectable calling? Dick Erridge ought to know; he appeared to have been acquainted with Nan's father for years. Doubtless there were disquieting circumstances. There was the prompt and skilful manner in which Mr. Summers had bowled over the two navvies in the Oxford Road (a performance which had won Sidney's entire admiration); there was the proud look with which Nan had turned to her father when he, Sidney, chanced

to be talking of the fashion in which the Greeks had glorified wrestling and boxing and all athletic games ; and there was the curious fact that Mr. Summers seemed to have cut himself off from all his former companions, even refusing Nan's repeated prayer that he should bring some of them about the house, to cheer him up a bit. But would a professional pugilist—even granting that a strong, animal-like instinct of affection was no certain key to any one's nature—would a person accustomed to the battering of the prize-ring be likely to show that assiduous care in small trifles which made Mr. Summers's treatment of his daughter such a beautiful thing to look at ?

Meanwhile, between mother and son not a single further word had been uttered on this momentous subject. Sidney, at first indignantly incredulous, controlled himself (indeed he could not be in any wise discourteous to the stately, silver-haired dame

of whom he was so fond and proud) and would wait until he could procure a definite refutation of the charge that had been made; Mrs. Hume, more confident of her position, was content to abide the result of this disclosure. And of that result she had no doubt whatsoever. Youth might be absurdly romantic (though this son of hers had scarcely ever seemed to have a look to throw a woman's way), but it was too impossible to imagine that the last of all these splendid Humes, the inheritor of all her remaining hopes, would think of bringing the daughter of a prize-fighter into the family.

‘Whate’er hath end, whate’er begins,
There’ll aye be Hays while Teviot rins’——

but Thomas the Rhymer could not have foreseen the contingency of this climax of disgrace. And no such thing would happen. It was all too inconceivable. Her tall and handsome boy had got into some unfor-

fortunate blunder, had perhaps been deceived; but now that his eyes were open there would be an end. The girl was pretty, no doubt—even a beautiful creature, if the truth were confessed; and she had good manners; and an attractive kind of simplicity and directness that won for her favour: it was easy to understand how any young fellow might have had his senses confused for the moment. Even the father, if it came to that, though he had hardly the bearing of a gentleman, was harmless enough—diffident—keeping himself out of the way—apparently conscious of his position and in a sort of fashion apologetic for it. All the same the idea of introducing the daughter of an ex-pugilist as the latest accession to the great family of the Hays and Humes was too preposterous to be entertained for a moment; and this brisk and confident lady, emboldened by the unvarying success of a lifetime, brushed such a possibility aside as not

worth regarding, and only waited for Sidney to be definitely and finally convinced.

At breakfast the same embarrassing silence prevailed, on that one point; but Mrs. Hume affected to be very cheerful, and would give him the last news she had heard from the various members of the family—perhaps with some covert and skilful design of recalling him to a sense of the duties of his position. It was all a talk about Jeanie, and Philip, and Agatha, and the rest—arrangements for the autumn—house parties—grouse-moors—salmon-fishings—to say nothing of the festivities of the remaining weeks in town: a picture of a fine array of people healthily and busily employed in amusing themselves.

“But poor dear Helen,” continued Mrs. Hume, compassionately—and she spoke of Lady Helen quite as if she belonged to this domestic set. “It is really too selfish and inconsiderate of her father to go and leave her to shift for herself. Men only—

nothing but men—at that Perthshire lodge of his. Not that her tastes and inclinations lie that way at all. I know what she is dreaming of; she is dreaming of Corfu, and Santa Maura, and Sappho's Leap, and Ithaca with the Odyssey as her guide, and Mycenae, and moonlight nights on the Acropolis. That is one thing about my dearest Helen; she has imagination, and sympathy; when you talk to her, there is response. And she has been quite frequently to the British Museum of late—to the gem-room, chiefly——”

When she mentioned the British Museum, it was not to the gem-room his mind instantly carried him; rather he bethought him of a certain panathenaic amphora decorated with figures of Greek boxers about to engage. But he said nothing. It was not a time for taunts or sarcasm. The situation was too grave.

Directly after breakfast he went along into the town; if this story about Mr.

Summers were well known he would soon get at the bottom of it. And he had not gone far when he perceived Dick Erridge, who was standing with several companions in front of the Red Lion. Dick eyed the new-comer somewhat askance and coldly. It is true he had determined to act the part of a noble and generous rival; he would show more distinctly than ever that he was no 'bounder'; nevertheless, the old Adam, lying deep, occasionally begrudges these high resolves. But Sidney went right up to him.

"Can you spare me a couple of minutes?" he said; and therewith Dick left his knot of acquaintances; and the two young men walked a few yards away, so that they could converse without risk of being overheard.

"Didn't you tell me," Sidney began, in his direct fashion, "that Mr. Summers had been a trainer, a well-known trainer of race-horses?"

Dick looked rather uneasy.

"Oh, well," he said, evasively, "he made his little pile on the turf, don't you know—and it's all in the same swim—everybody in America is called a Colonel——"

"What I want to know is this," Sidney broke in, impatiently. "Is it true, or is it not true, that Mr. Summers was ever in the prize-ring—was he ever a professional pugilist?——"

The puffy short young man seemed a little frightened.

"Well, yes, he was——" he stammered.

"Then why the mischief didn't you honestly say so?" Sidney exclaimed, in a blaze of anger.

But at this Dick Erridge plucked up his spirit somewhat.

"Oh, it's all very easy," said he—"it's all very easy to talk. But when you're asked to say what a man has been, you can't begin and recite his biography right off the reel. Perhaps I forgot to tell you

who were his godfathers and godmothers? It's quite true that Jim Summers—that Mr. Summers—was at one time in the ring; but it's a great many years ago; and when he had got funds enough, he started as a book-maker; and it's as a book-maker that he lived and flourished—flourished pretty well, I take it—until he retired from active business altogether, and came to set up house here at Crowhurst. Perhaps I should have told you; but some people have such prejudices; and then it was only a casual question, as I thought—I did not know that you were personally concerned—I did not anticipate the little communication that was made to me yesterday, or I might have been more careful——”

Sidney guessed what the poor chap meant, and his anger softened.

“Then Mr. Summers was not a trainer, but a book-maker—is that so? Let's have the truth!” he exclaimed.

“I may have said trainer instead of

book-maker," Dick confessed. "But, bless you, they're all in a system—bookies, trainers, jockies, and gee-gees, to say nothing of the noble owners—they're all in a system; and sometimes you give a man the benefit of a courtesy title, in passing the time of day, don't you know. A book-maker?—I should think so! Did you never hear of 'honest Jim Summers'? Ah, but you're not in that line, of course—cloisters pale——"

He looked up, and perceived that his companion, plunged in a profound reverie, was hardly listening to him.

"There's nothing wrong, is there?" he asked, anxiously. "There's no harm done? There's not going to be any alteration?——"

Sidney was silent for a moment or two: these were strange contingencies he had now to face. Then he said slowly, and in a half-absent sort of way,

"No, I don't think there is anything wrong—no, I don't think so."

For when once he had yielded to the glamour of Nan's eyes—close by this very spot where he now stood—under the shadow of St. Mary's Church—then all that had happened subsequently could not very well have happened otherwise, no matter what information had been vouchsafed him. When once he had discovered that the world held for him but the one woman, and had further discovered, to his inexpressible astonishment and joy, that her heart was well-inclined towards him, then social grades and distinctions became small things. One look from under her lashes—one touch of her hand—was of more consequence to him than any pride of birth or station. This was not romance, he said to himself. This was common-sense. He had but the one life to live; and here was the crown and glory of it, that he had been so happy and so fortunate as to secure.

He was standing in this pensive mood, scarcely listening to his companion, when

he chanced to raise his eyes, for there was a vehicle passing near. It was Lady Helen's mail-phaeton, herself driving. Instinctively he raised his hat, but just as he did so he became conscious that the recognition she had accorded him was of a singularly cold description. No welcoming smile—no friendly glance; only the stiffest and shortest and briefest of bows; and then her face was set straight before her again, as if she would ostentatiously proclaim that only the most casual acquaintanceship existed between her and the young man. What could it all mean? He had given her no cause of offence that he knew of. Then he suddenly recalled the fact of his having passed Mrs. Spink on the previous day, when Nan was driving him in her phaeton along the Fair Mile. Had that enigmatical person carried her report of the encounter to Monks-Hatton Hall, perhaps with some darkly added innuendo? Well, he could not help it: he had other

things—surely of sufficient urgency—to think of. And so he turned to Dick Erridge, whom it was his duty now to release.

“You are going on the river, I suppose?” he suggested.

“No, thanks,” said Dick, in rather a down-spirited way. “I’ve had enough of Henley this journey. I sha’n’t forget Henley in a hurry. I’m going to walk out to Crowhurst to do my P.P.C.; and then I’m off home. I know when I’ve had enough.”

Sidney felt sorry for this poor lad, the story of whose disappointment had been hinted to him on the previous evening by Mr. Summers.

“I will walk out with you, if you like,” he said.

“Oh, very well,” Dick responded; and as they set forth together he continued his ingenuous talk, though not in such a gay mood as usual. “There’s no quarrel

between you and me—none : let that be understood. What I say is, it is for the lady to make her choice ; and when the lady has made her choice, then it is for her friends — her friends who are her friends — to rally. That's what I say. There's no spite and dog-in-the-manger business about me ; I'm not such a bounder as all that. I confess it's a little rough. Here's my grandfather gets it into his old noddle that my conversation is a cure for lumbago—my conversation!—a cure for lumbago ! Is anybody's conversation a cure for lumbago ? And then of a sudden you get this thing sprung on you ; and it's just as if you'd come a crowner over a five-barred gate, and you felt as if your head was digging up turnips twenty feet deep. But I don't bear malice. You lugged me out of the Thames. And Jim Summers's daughter is Jim Summers's daughter ; and when she wants a friend, I'm here—I'm on the spot, I am."

“I think she understands that anyway,” said Sidney.

Then the other proceeded, with some air of apology :

“I don’t say but that I should have told you that Mr. Summers had been a famous boxer once upon a time, and that he had made his money as a book-maker; but I could not guess you were likely to stand in this relationship to him; and people have prejudices. But mind you,” said Dick, pluckily, “don’t imagine there’s anything that Jim Summers would hide, or that his daughter would hide. Don’t imagine there’s anything for him to be ashamed of. There’s some of us would say it was all the other way about. As for me, in my humble way, I tell you I would rather go to a race-meeting in the company of Mr. Summers than with any man in England, bar none. And I am proud that he takes any notice of me; and allows me to call on him as a friend; and if I had

begun to think of other things, I suppose that was all my bally cheek, and that I have been jolly well served out. But as I say, I'm not going to whimper. I know what's what. When you get one between the eyes, you'd better sit down quietly and wait for the sponge. And this is my last word : if Jim Summers's daughter wants a friend, and asks me—she'll have to ask me, mind, for I'm not going to thrust myself on her—if she wants a friend, and appeals to me, she won't find me running away very fast."

"I think she understands that," said Sidney: he was becoming more and more convinced that there was a good deal of genuine human nature about this young man, despite his sensitiveness about his costume.

They found Nan busy in her rose garden, her faithful and submissive attendant with her; and they received a most kindly welcome. Dick had to be the spokesman

for the two visitors ; for Sidney Hume was unusually silent ; while Dick, as it turned out, was inclined to be lugubrious.

“England’s no place for me,” he was saying, despondently. “I’m no use to anybody. I may as well go away and see what’s to be seen. I’m for a skip across the herring-pond, that’s my idea—over to San Francisco, perhaps ; and if I’m there before the 20th August, I may have a look at Tim Mulligan after the Tasmanian Devil has been playing about with him for half an hour—not so much blather and bluster *then*. Or I might get away down to the other side of the world—to Australia : they must be a clever lot of Johnnies to cling on to the ground with their feet, with their heads hanging in the air. What is there in London, now the Albatross Club has gone bust?—nothing left but the halls, and it’s the same sickening old game—the familiar old wheezes—night after night. No, England’s played out ;

or perhaps I am played out ; anyhow I'm off."

"Nonsense, man!" said Mr. Summers, good-naturedly. "What's the use of talking like that! Come along in-doors and I'll show you how I've altered the height of the pulleys." Whereupon Dick, with all the chirpiness for the moment gone out of him, was haled away ; and Sidney and Nan were left alone together.

But it was no ordinary lovers' confabulation that followed now, though the time and place were propitious. She went quickly forward to him—she put her hand on his arm—she looked anxiously up into his face.

"Sidney," she said, "you are troubled about something : what is it?"

"It is nothing that need affect you, Nan," he made answer.

"But what affects you affects me ; and I want to know," she insisted. "What is it?"

“Oh, well,” he said, with grim irony—for he would make light of this matter, “it is a very common occurrence. When a man chooses a wife, his relatives invariably think he should have consulted them first; and they are quite hurt, quite pained and hurt, because he has not done so, because of his want of consideration; and of course they object, and disapprove, and may even become indignant——”

“I knew it—I guessed it at once,” she said, with swift intuition. “It is your mother. I told you she would be my enemy——”

“She is not your enemy—how could she be your enemy?” he remonstrated. “She has seen you; she has talked with you: how could she have any objection to you of any kind whatsoever?”

“The objection is to my father, then?” the girl said, breathlessly. “Then she is more than my enemy!”

“Nan, Nan!” said he, with grave for-

bearance, "if there is to be trouble, that is not the way to face it. You cannot expect people who have never seen you to understand what you are, and what your circumstances are, and have been. And I have a lot of relatives; and I dare say they have intolerant prejudices like most other people; and I shouldn't wonder if they began calling me names. But I ask you, Nan: did you ever hear of the calling of names hurting any one?"

"It is more serious than that, Sidney," she said, scrutinising his face with an almost piteous earnestness. "I read it in your look the moment you came along. And it is something quite recent—something that has happened since yesterday. Trouble?" she went on, rather sadly. "If there is to be trouble, it is not for myself I fear; it is for you. And my father warned me. He said your people were not our people——"

"Quite so," he interjected. "Perhaps

so. But that need not prevent my becoming one of your people."

"He spoke to me once or twice," she continued, unheeding, "about breaking off the acquaintanceship. And I had resolved to do that——"

"And a very pretty way you took," he again interposed. "A very pretty way of breaking off an acquaintanceship. Do you remember how you did it, Nan? Do you remember the where and when? There was a gate somewhere near, wasn't there—up on the high ridge—between the tall hedges. Can you tell me what colour of dress you wore?—because if you can't, I can tell *you*. And was it your straw hat or another, and what were the flowers? And when your hands were held tight, had your upturned eyes anything to say, or hadn't they? And the wind had been rather rude with your hair; the tangles had to be smoothed down a little—wasn't that so? Oh, yes, a very pretty way of

breaking off an acquaintanceship, an admirable way, an excellent way : suppose we try it now—if old John the gardener has discreetly disappeared ? ”

For that look of foreboding and concern had quite gone from his face. What did he care for all those Hays and Humes, for Thomas the Rhymer and Teviot-side and its tower, when Nan’s speedwell eyes were regarding him, now doubting and timorous, again half inclined to gather courage, and when these stray waifs of golden-brown hair had such need of smoothing and petting ? No doubt they had their fine lands and houses—those relatives of his—Ellerdale and the rest : here Nan was in her own kingdom—of roses and yellow pansies, of sweet-williams and honeysuckle, of monkshood and musk and columbine ; and the white day was shining around them, and the air was soft and fragrant with changing scents ; and the sweet desire of youth was drawing those two together

with a force at once unsuspected, inscrutable, and imperious. 'Cypris the terrible' was no longer terrible; now she was a gracious queen, smiling benignly—on two lovers lost in their land of enchantment.

All the rest of that day Sidney wandered away through the country lanes by himself, searching out certain problems; and when he returned to Lilac Lodge there was barely time for him to dress for dinner. As he and his mother sat down at table Mrs. Hume said, blithely enough:

"I wonder what has become of Helen; I quite understood she expected us to go along to the Hall this evening, to see the illuminations; but there has not been a single word or a line of a message."

He changed the subject without apology.

"Mater," he said, in his grave and simple way, "I have been making inquiries about what you told me last night. You were right—and I was wrong. It is not true that Mr. Summers was a trainer: I was

misinformed about that. And it is true that he was connected with the prize-ring, for a time, many years ago; but as soon as he could he left it, and became a book-maker; and now he has retired from the betting-ring as well; and is—what you see him. These, as far as I can make out, are the facts.”

She concealed her triumph.

“Of course I have nothing to say against the man,” she said. “Of course not—a very worthy man, no doubt, in his own sphere. And I am sorry for any disappointment that the daughter may suffer——”

“But the daughter won’t suffer any disappointment, as far as I can help it,” he observed; calmly.

She stared at him with startled eyes.

“Sidney!” she exclaimed. “You don’t mean to say you can be so mad as to dream of keeping on those relations—now you know the truth?”

“I mean to say that the relations between

myself and Anne Summers are precisely what they were," he made answer; "and I see no reason why they should change."

"But the prize-ring!" she cried. "The betting-ring!"

"What has she got to do with either?" he asked. "*She* never was in the prize-ring. *She* never was in the betting-ring——"

"But the low associations—the horrible associations——"

"What associations has she come in contact with?" he demanded, with something more of warmth. "She has been brought up all her life in a vicar's family down in Somersetshire."

"So it comes to this, then," his mother said, with bitter emphasis, "that the youngest of the Humes of Ellerdale proposes to marry the daughter of a prize-fighter, an ex-champion, a common pugilist: that is the prospect, is it?"

In her overmastering indignation she

could say no more. She rose from the table, crossed the floor, opened the door for herself, and swept from the room. He did not see her again that evening.

CHAPTER II.

AT AN OPEN WINDOW.

Mrs. HUME was desperate, but not yet despairing; she was a woman of quick resource, intrepid, and confident, who had met and overcome many difficulties in her long career of success; and she was not likely to yield without a struggle now. And the very first thing she did, early the next morning, was to send for a cab to take her along to Monks-Hatton Hall.

Arrived there, she was shown into the drawing-room, and she went up to one of the windows, to look abroad over the river and its banks, where the work of dismantling had already begun; but she turned quickly enough when she heard the

door open again; and here was her dearest Helen, advancing and smiling a welcome to her. Lady Helen was attired in an extremely pretty morning gown; but she herself was not looking very well; the London season had left traces of lassitude and fatigue on her refined and delicate features; besides, she had been taken unawares.

The two ladies kissed each other effusively.

“I won’t apologise for calling at such an hour——”

“I should think not,” said Lady Helen.

“—for the fact is I’m in trouble, Helen dear,” Mrs. Hume went on, “and the one comforting thing, when you’re in trouble, is to know the friend to whom you can turn for consolation and help. And that’s why I have come to you, dearest Helen. You are the only one who can save me—who can save all of us: you are the only one who can make us all happy and content

again; and you can do it so easily. I was saying to myself all the way along, ‘How lucky to have dear Helen for an ally: everything will be put right now.’ ”

Lady Helen’s surprise was clearly tempered by incredulity.

“My dear Mrs. Hume,” said she, smiling, “it is impossible to associate any very serious trouble with you—you who are so self-reliant, and so clever, and so capable of judging of affairs. How can you be in trouble?—and how is it possible that I could be of help to you of all people?”

“But you can, dear,” Mrs. Hume proceeded, “and you only. I have come to you about Sidney——”

There was an almost imperceptible quiver of Lady Helen’s eyelids; and from this instant the expression of her face was changed: she was no longer a smiling and affectionate confidante—she had become a watchful listener, reserved, and cold, and cautious.

“You know, Helen, what has been the dearest wish of my heart for many a day back,” Mrs. Hume continued—with a sort of pathetic appeal to that impassive face. “And everything was going on so well, as I imagined—and everything will go well yet—oh, yes indeed—I am hopeful enough—only there must be a little forethought and discretion. Young men are such strange creatures; such trifling things strike their fancy for the moment—the turn of a lip, a profile, anything. You know the bronze head in the Castellani collection: well, I’ve heard that long lad of mine just rave about the expression of the mouth; and of course if he came across that in a human being, it would interest him for the moment—for the moment——”

“Really, Mrs. Hume,” said Lady Helen, with an alarming stiffness of manner, “I don’t see how I am concerned——”

“But I only wished to show you, dear,” continued Mrs. Hume, in no wise put out,

“how these fancies may attract for the moment, and draw a young man away from the serious interests of life—but only for the moment. And that is how it stands with Sidney. That is my trouble; and I ask you for help. He has fallen in with two people—father and daughter—who are not at all in his own sphere—but Sidney was always very independent in that way: however, there is no doubt he has found some passing attraction in the girl—some attraction of the moment—and unless he is interfered with, goodness knows what may happen. Some absolute absurdity, no doubt. I suppose he would tell us that as regards marriage his incomparable Greeks recognised no difference of birth or station, so long as the two high contracting parties were Greek citizens. But we have got to prevent his marching on to any such fatuity; and it rests with you, Helen.”

“Indeed it does not,” said Lady Helen,

decisively. "Indeed it does not. I can have nothing to do with the matter."

"But I appeal to you as a friend—as a daughter—for it is as a daughter I have been regarding you for many a day back—I appeal to you," the anxious mother said, "not to balk all the hopes we have been forming for both you and him. We have all of us been looking on it as quite settled—and so it might be if you will only do as I ask you——"

"Mrs. Hume, I cannot comprehend you!" Lady Helen protested.

"Shall I be more explicit?"

"If you please!"

"Very well, then. Sidney has got into an entanglement with this girl, and for the moment will not listen to reason. But you can bring him back to reason, and restore him to us, if you like. And quite easily!"

"And how?" asked Lady Helen, with ominous coldness—but she was listening and watching intently.

“ Surely,” said Mrs. Hume, “ surely after all the attention he paid you in London, after the constant association that was observed by every one—for of course I know nothing of any private understanding—surely you have the right to go to him and say that you consider him bound in honour to you. Then how can he refuse? And he is so bound: I have told him so! His honour is pledged: how can he draw back? Surely that is a simple solution of the difficulty!—and we shall all be so grateful to you, and I shall have my dear Helen as my daughter, for that has been the dream of my life ever since I saw you and him together.”

The strangest smile appeared in Lady Helen’s face—a smile of tranquil amusement.

“ You have indeed brought a budget of surprises with you this morning, my dear Mrs. Hume,” she said. “ But this is the most astonishing of all. You arrange a

very pretty little scheme with regard to your son and myself without in the least taking into account what my inclinations might be. Did it never occur to you that I might have quite other views? Did it never occur to you that you might be considering an absolute impossibility—something that never for a moment could have entered Sidney's head or my own—not mine, at all events!"

Her audacity was almost bewildering.

"Helen, how can you say so!" Mrs. Hume exclaimed. "Never entered your head even as a possibility!—when you and I have talked over this project again and again—when you knew how I was looking forward to its being realised——"

"Pardon me, my dear Mrs. Hume," said Lady Helen, sweetly, "but you forget. You have mentioned such a thing to me once or twice, I know. But you do not seem to remember what I have invariably answered you on such occasions. Haven't

I always assured you that you were looking forward to a chimera? Haven't I always told you that the only thing he could tolerate about me was my name, because of Helen of Troy? And then there's another point," she continued, with some spirit. "It isn't merely what Mr. Sidney may say or do. There must be some disposition on both sides. And I must tell you frankly, dear Mrs. Hume, that his wandering fancies are welcome to wander, so far as I am concerned—quite welcome, indeed. How you could have imagined anything else I cannot conceive for a moment. How you could have imagined that it mattered to me one pin's point what girl he had fallen in with—and how you could have thought that I should be willing to call him back—even if he were willing to come—it is all beyond my comprehension! Sidney and I were always very good friends, in a kind of a way; but as for anything else——"

“Helen,” said Mrs. Hume, angrily, “what brooch is that you are wearing?”

Well, it was the little Roman charm that Sidney had given her; and she had had it very cunningly fixed up with delicate chain-work of platinum and gold. On being thus challenged, she flushed in confusion, hastily unpinned the brooch, and threw it aside.

“One picks up anything when one is in a hurry in the morning,” she said, impatiently. “It was an accident.”

“Helen, dear,” said Mrs. Hume, in a more pacific fashion, “I am an older woman than you, and I have seen more of human nature. Perhaps, as regards Sidney and yourself, if the way were clearer, you would not be quite so callous and indifferent? Only, as I understand you, you won’t help me to have the way made clearer?——”

“Not in the manner you suggest—certainly not!” Lady Helen answered distinctly. “Why, the very idea is prepos-

terous! My dear Mrs. Hume, you must allow me to retain a little self-respect!"

Mrs. Hume rose.

"Helen," she said, quietly, "if you knew how I look upon you, and if you knew all that I had been anticipating, you would know that I could never ask you to do anything inconsistent with your self-respect. I came to you in my trouble, and asked for your help, and it seems you cannot give it me. Very well, there may be some other means."

She prepared to take her departure, but Lady Helen did not ring the bell; she herself accompanied her friend into the hall, and opened the front door for her, while both of them lingered for a moment, perhaps reluctant to say the last word.

"At least I may let you know what happens?" Mrs. Hume said. "The subject is not forbidden?"

"Whatever concerns you will always have an interest for me, you know that," said

the younger woman ; and then they kissed, and separated ; and Mrs. Hume drove away. Finally Lady Helen went back to the drawing-room to recover the little Roman bell that she had thrown aside : it would not do to have the servants examining such things.

And now Mrs. Hume, as she drove off, appeared to be in more tragic case than ever. What would all those proud families of Hays and Humes have to say to her ? They seemed to stand ranged as an accusing host, regarding her with indignant and upbraiding eyes. She had been—for her—curiously remiss and supine. Why had she not discovered this entanglement before ? Why had she not brought matters to a definite climax when Sidney and Helen Yorke were both in London, and constantly together ? And now that she had in some wild way to retrieve these blunders, she found herself painfully alone. Her handsome boy, who had always been so much

her companion and ally — and always courteously obedient to her — was now in open revolt, drawn away by the wiles of another woman. As for Helen Yorke, Mrs. Hume understood pretty well the value of that young lady's audacious denials and asseverations; she guessed that if any signs became visible of Sidney returning to his proper allegiance, dearest Helen would be discovered to be in a very different mood. But, alone as she was, she did not even yet despair. Helen's defection — which was clearly dictated by pure selfishness — was disappointing; but a baffled person is not necessarily beaten. Surely there were other means? For it seemed absolutely incredible to her that this ghastly thing should take place: surely there must be some intervention, coming from somewhere?

She had heedlessly told the driver of this open fly to take her back again to Lilac Lodge; but on the way they arrived at the

little triangular enclosure of trees and bushes that marks the junction of the Medmenham and Oxford roads; and here, on a sudden impulse, she called to him to stop. The man pulled up, and turned round, awaiting orders. At the moment she had none to give. She was looking away along the Fair Mile, and considering. What if she were to drive out to Crowhurst there and then? What if, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, she were to find the girl absent, and the father left in possession? If she could only get at Mr. Summers by himself, she thought she could effectively deal with him. He was a submissive kind of man; he appeared to be solicitous about his daughter's happiness; if he were persuaded that this foolish scheme would only end in misery for everybody concerned, then he would refuse his consent—he would take her away—he would do something—and all this imbroglio would gradually resolve itself. No doubt

the girl would have fits of crying and sobbing—for a time. People who cross the Bay of Biscay in bad weather sometimes wish they were dead; but when they have rounded Gib, and got into the smoother waters and milder airs of the Mediterranean, they soon revive; long before they have reached Malta they are up on deck again and as merry as crickets, with warm sunshine around them and blue seas and cloudless heavens; and by the time they are gliding in under the yellow walls of Fort St. Elmo, and climbing the steep thoroughfare, and wandering along the Strada Reale, they have not a care or perplexity in their heart, save perhaps a frantic desire to purchase lace handkerchiefs at thirty-six shillings a dozen instead of the regulation forty-two.

She hesitated no longer—she was ruthless, a mother defending her last remaining son.

“Do you know Crowhurst?” she said

to the man on the box. "Away beyond the Traveller's Rest—up in the woods——"

"Yes'm."

"Drive there then, please."

And as they went placidly along the Fair Mile, her brain was busy. What arguments, what inducements and persuasions, could she best bring to bear on this girl's father? But he seemed a quiet, unassuming, biddable sort of man, who obviously knew his station: she did not anticipate much resistance on his part.

When they reached Crowhurst, she bade the driver of the cab wait for her in the roadway; she descended, opened the gate for herself, and walked up to the house. As she did so, she heard a sound of music—one of Mendelssohn's Songs without Words, being played very softly and sympathetically: the window of the drawing-room was open to the garden. For a second she paused, in vexation; clearly the girl was at home; it was more likely

the father who was absent. Nevertheless Mrs. Hume had not come all this way for nothing; she was a resolute person; she walked up to the door and rang the bell; and when the young maidservant informed her that Mr. Summers was out, but that she could see Miss Anne, she accepted that invitation, and followed the maid into the modest little hall. There was a tapping at the drawing-room door; a 'Come in!' and presently Mrs. Hume found herself face to face with her enemy, who had risen from the piano. Both forgot to shake hands; for half a second there seemed to be miles of silence and distrust between these two; and Nan's fingers, as she sought relief from her confusion and vague apprehension in the actual business of bringing forward a lounging-chair, distinctly trembled. Her heart was like lead.

"I am so glad to find you at home, Miss Summers," the tall, silver-haired lady said, in her blindest fashion—for she had

no desire to overawe or frighten the pretty and timid young thing who now took a seat opposite her: that was not her way of setting to work at all. "I had hoped perhaps to see your father; but I dare say I can explain the object of my visit quite as well to you, perhaps better. And I hope there will be nothing said that will cause you pain—I have no wish to do that—though to be sure, there are few situations in life that have not their vexations and disappointments—sometimes cruel enough at the moment——"

She, at all events—this stately dame with the fresh and bright complexion, the clear, shrewd eyes and confident air—seemed to have encountered that inevitable legion of sorrows without sustaining any very material damage.

"Sidney has told me," she went on, "of this idle day-dream of his. But you know what young men are—or rather you don't, for you have had no experience—whereas

I have—plenty—I have had to study both them and their wild, impracticable whims and humours, that last for an hour or two, and are then happily forgotten. And Sidney cannot be expected to be wiser than the rest of them—he has seen little of the world—buried in his college occupations and his books; and this last idea of his—well, I suppose it is not more absurd than most of the projects of impetuous and flighty young men who don't know their own mind——”

“But, Mrs. Hume,” Nan interposed, “why do you come to me? Why do you not say all this to himself?”

“Because he is so hot-headed, like the rest of them. Now you,” continued this astute lady, in her pleasant manner, “you are reasonable. Any physiognomist could tell you that—you have a calm judgment, and intelligence. And you will understand how this fancy that my son has formed for you—very natural—oh, yes, I

don't wonder at it in the least—but still it is a mere fancy, and it can lead to nothing—unless, indeed, it leads to the misery of every one concerned.”

Nan sat mute and attentive, not uttering a word—though something in her heart seemed to say, ‘ Sidney, why are you away from me ! ’

“ Perhaps I do not set as much store as some do on pride of race, and social position,” Mrs. Hume proceeded. “ And I have heard of marriages between people in different ranks of life that turned out well enough—rare instances, no doubt. But in your case, dear Miss Summers—I hope you will pardon me if I speak plainly—there is an insuperable barrier, that you must yourself recognise ; and that insuperable barrier is—your father’s career. No—have patience ! Do not be angry. I have not a word of blame. But the fact exists. And if I were to ask you now—in plain language—whether you would like to marry

into a family that would look down on your father——”

“I would not do it—I would do no such thing!” Nan broke in.

“But that is the whole position,” rejoined the elder woman, triumphantly. “That is the whole position! Of course I knew what you, as an affectionate daughter, would say. And that shows you the impossibility——”

“And why should they look down on my father?” said Nan, warmly. “Has he ever pretended to be other than he is? Has he ever concealed anything—or been found out? Has he ever done anything disgraceful, or to be ashamed of? And you must remember this, Mrs. Hume, that we never asked to be admitted into your family. It was your son who came here——”

“Quite so—quite so,” said Mrs. Hume, eager to appease. And then she shook her head in a mournful and sympathetic

way. "It is altogether a sad position of affairs; and I can see no way out of it, unless Sidney and you have the courage and the common-sense to do the right thing, and that is to break off an attachment that could only lead to misery and repentance. I am sorry, in a way. It might have been otherwise, but for this unhappy obstacle. But then, you see, how could that ever be got over? Your father, as you know, was connected with the prize-ring, was a professional betting-man. Well, English society is tolerant—very tolerant, as it had need to be in these days—but I am afraid a line would be drawn——"

"We will not ask any one to draw any line," said Nan, proudly.

"Mind you," continued Mrs. Hume, still cunningly anxious to propitiate, "not one of us has a word to say against you personally. Of course not—certainly not. And I will admit that in other circum-

stances I might have been most pleased to welcome you as a daughter-in-law. But you must perceive for yourself—here is your father——”

Nan had had about enough of this. All her despairing thoughts of her lover were for the moment swept out of her mind by her devotion and loyalty to one whom she had known more closely, all through the years of her life.

“Yes, indeed,” she said—and there was no cringing about her, or piteous pleading : if her figure was slight, it was as erect as that of the tall lady who now confronted her ; and her mouth was fearless—if her lips were somewhat pale. “Yes, indeed, there is my father. And if that is the question you came to ask, Mrs. Hume, then this is my answer—that I mean to remain by him. I will not ask your family whether they look down on him or not : they shall not have the opportunity. That is all I have to say ; and it is enough.”

There may have been some phrases of justification or apology added to Mrs. Hume's saying good-bye ; but these at least were not overheard by a man who now rose from the iron garden-seat outside the open drawing-room window, and walked slowly away, with his head downcast. It was Nan's father. Coming back from his morning ramble and his pipe, he had noticed the cab at the gate, and wondered that a visitor should arrive so early. But he would not interrupt Nan. He kept outside. And then, as he chanced to go by the open window, he heard a voice that he did not seem at first to recognise. He drew nearer. There was some talk about himself—about himself and Nan ; and as he had no scruples at all where Nan's welfare was concerned, he sat down on the garden-seat and listened. And when the visitor rose to go, he rose also, and departed. His sallow face had become of an ashen-gray.

He walked with slow and laboured foot-

steps along the path—Nan's columbines and pinks and campanulas were all unheeded now—until he found himself in a small summer-house, and there he again sat down, breathing somewhat hard. His two hands—curiously enough he had withdrawn his arm from the sling, that now hung useless round his neck—were placed on the rude table in front of him, and they were clenched as in the grip of a vise; his eyes were staring before him. He remained so for not more than half a minute. He rose, with a heavy sigh, and went out into the whiter light. And then, glancing for a moment towards the house—as if he feared that Nan might make her appearance to claim him—he made his way into the orchard, opened a door in the brick wall, and passed into the larch plantation, whence he could, if he chose, gain the Henley road. But he had no thought of going in that direction. He only wished to be alone—with his agony.

Late that evening, when they had come in from their final stroll, they found that the lamps in the dining-room had just been lit ; but they did not draw the curtains ; for now and again there was a flash of summer lightning outside ; and it was something to look at—the vivid gleam of pale orange across the deep blue-black of the window-panes. Nan, when she had attended to her father's wants, took her accustomed seat beside him, her head resting against his knee.

“Dodo,” said she, with much affectation of cheerfulness, “you must tell me what it is you have been thinking about the whole of this day. I know there is something. Is it money ? For I fear we are far too extravagant in this house ; and we could so easily economise——”

“No, no, Nan,” he answered, hastily. “You must not dream of that. I wish you would not worry half so much over those books : we could well afford a little more

freedom. What was I thinking about?—oh, it is so difficult to say! And you,” he added, timidly—as if inviting and yet dreading her confidence, “have you had nothing to think of all the day long?”

But this was a brave-hearted lass: she could keep her bitter griefs, her sad renunciations, to herself—for the dark watches of the night.

“Oh, nothing to speak of,” she made answer, in rather a low voice.

Both were silent for a considerable time—he with his head sunk in his bosom, his eyes haunted and haggard, his face sombre. And then he said slowly,

“I am going up to London to-morrow, Nan.”

“Yes, Dodo?”

“For a day only—perhaps two days,” he went on. “I—I want to see Dick Erridge—I have some business affairs to arrange. You must amuse yourself as best you can until I come back, you know. And keep

light-hearted, Nan—keep a light heart: it's wonderful how troubles disappear, when you might least expect it. Yes, I must see Dick Erridge—I must get hold of Dick—Dick and I may have some matters to put straight."

She did not notice that his clenched right hand, resting on the table, shook as if with the palsy. She herself had a sufficiency of things to think of—as she waited and watched for those sudden gleams across the blue-black panes.

CHAPTER III.

AN ALLY.

DICK ERRIDGE's chambers in London were close by Piccadilly Circus—a convenient centre for theatres and music halls; they were plentifully decorated with photographs of actresses, famous and otherwise; and on this particular morning a cigarette-box, a liqueur-bottle, and two small glasses stood on the central table of the sitting-room. Dick himself was reading a sporting paper; but he quickly threw that aside when he heard a heavy footstep on the stairs without; he had received a telegram—and was expecting his hero and friend.

“ Well, this is something like ! ” he exclaimed, joyfully, as Mr. Summers made

his appearance on the landing. "This is a sight for sore eyes! And how long are you to be up?—two or three nights I hope—fact is, the complexion of this town wants altering—it's too pale—we'll give it a little tinge——"

His speech died away into silence. There was something unusual in this man's face as he came into the light.

"Dick," said Nan's father, sinking into a chair, "you spoke the other day of going to Australia. You're not going just at once, are you? You haven't made all your arrangements yet, have you? For I'm going with you—I'll go with you, Dick—and then, you see, when you're tired of the place and want to come home again, then that's all right—you'll leave me there. You see, I'm not coming back—I'm not coming back any more to England."

Erridge stared at him.

"Why, what's all this about?" he cried.

"Only that I'm in the way, Dick—I'm

in the way—God help me, I'm in the way!"

He rose and went to the window; and Dick did not follow him. He remained there some time. When he returned and resumed his seat he looked tired and languid, and he seemed to breathe with difficulty.

"I want to make it easy for Nan," he said. "I want to make it all right for her. They'll have no objection to her if I'm out of the way; and if I lose myself in Australia, and cut off all communication, and never come back to England again, why, it's as good as if I were a dead man. Oh, I can quite understand their view—it's natural: I can quite understand. For one thing, the young people mightn't like my turning up at their house—they might have company come in, don't you see—and yet they would be too good-natured to show any annoyance; and then again I should be a constant source of offence to those relatives—there might be words bandied—

and Nan, she is proud, you know—there would be continual trouble. But now, this way, there can't be any trouble. I simply clear out; and Nan, when she goes amongst these people, will soon make friends—for she is a happy kind of creature—she will soon make friends with all of them, will Nan. And you'll write and tell me about it, Dick; that will be the only communication I shall have with the old country; and it will have to be kept a secret in your hands alone, my lad, for it is just possible Nan might want to find out where I was——”

“Oh, but look here,” Dick Erridge exclaimed, when he had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment, “you needn't suppose for an instant that Miss Anne would let you go! She wouldn't accept such a tremendous sacrifice——”

“Oh, yes, she will,” the other said.

“And even supposing she were to consent—I don't believe it for a moment—but of

course you are her father—you may order her—perhaps she may obey you. Very good. But what I want to say is this,” continued Dick, with increasing warmth, “that even if she were willing to let such a thing happen, what about Hume, what about that fellow Hume? Is he going to allow it? Is he going to allow you to be sacrificed in such a way—banished from your own country—and banished from your own daughter, which is a heap worse, as I take it—is he going to allow all this merely to save the feelings of his relatives and connections? Because this is what I’ve got to say, and I’m not going to make any bones about it: if he allows you to be treated like that, then I call him a howling cad. I don’t care what his fine friends and relatives are: if he is going to accept such a sacrifice at your hands, I call him nothing else than a howling cad—that’s what I call him, and I’ll stick to it—I’m d——d if I don’t stick to it.”

“Well, Dick, you *can* talk the most infernal nonsense when you’ve a mind that way,” Summers said, angrily. (But the young man did not heed. His breathless indignation may have left his cheeks a little paler even than usual: nevertheless, he had had his say.) “Here are you pronouncing judgment, and you’ve only heard of this proposal within five minutes. And I’ve had all yesterday and all last night—for you may suppose I did not sleep much last night—to plan it out and make it practicable. Supposing I tell you I have a scheme that will make it impossible for either of them to refuse?—and what’s more, they will think I am going away to Australia quite happy and content. And perhaps,” he added, more slowly, and his eyes had an absent look in them, “perhaps—in time—perhaps—I shall be quite happy and content—if I have made it all right for Nan.”

“I know I’m an ass,” said Dick, gloomily.

“Still, I must speak out sometimes. And I’m a bad host, too,” he proceeded, as he rose and fetched the two small glasses and the liqueur-bottle. “But you rather stumped me—took my breath away, in fact. Here, have a nip of kummel, and light a cigarette, and we’ll stroll along to Mentavisti’s: it’s just about lunch-time; and if we’re going to Australia together, there will be plenty to talk over and arrange.”

They walked along to the restaurant; and presently it became clear that Erridge, in his capacity of host, had been early abroad and made every preparation: a small side-table had been reserved for them; a quite sumptuous little banquet—an unnecessarily sumptuous little banquet—gradually made its appearance: the Chianti was excellent. Mr. Summers hardly looked at either food or drink.

“The steamers sail every other week, don’t they?” he was saying. “There are offices down in Pall Mall—I’ve seen the

models in the window. We might go in and look at the plans——”

“Are you in such a hurry as all that?” the younger man asked.

“Oh, no, no,” he answered, anxiously. “Whatever will suit your convenience, Dick. Only—only, I was thinking—that the sooner every one knew that I had dropped out—no longer any bother to any one—the better that would be. Oh, no, I don’t want to hurry you, my lad—I will wait your convenience—only, I should like to have the thing over. And perhaps you won’t mind my being rather a glum companion for a bit——”

“Now listen to me,” Dick broke in, impatiently. “I may be a fool, but I have the blessed privilege of knowing my own mind. And if this thing has to be, then it is for you to say how it is to be; and I am there. You do as you like; and I’m your most obedient: them’s my sentiments—and here’s your health—and a pleasant

voyage to both of us. If there are people in this country who think you are not good enough for them, it's the other way about with me; and I tell you it will be a proud day for me when you and I go together to see the running for the Melbourne Cup. Oh, we'll have some fun! All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy; and I'm about run out here—my brain overtaxed—trying to discover the fun of the music-hall wheezes. We'll have some fun, I tell you! And I'm not back in England yet. I think the Australian climate may very likely suit me—shouldn't wonder a bit. I say," he continued, regarding his guest rather significantly, "it won't be what you might call chilly, going down the Red Sea, will it? Quite mild, eh? No need for beaver-lined coats? Well, I don't care! I've been in a hotter corner, with three full hands out all at once, and my poor sevens and twos being bashed against the wall as if a Nasmyth hammer was chasing them. Gracious good-

ness, man, why don't you eat or drink something? If it is to be, it is to be; and you give me my marching orders——”

“Sure it won't be taking you away——?” said Summers, doubtfully; and yet there was in his eyes a kind of piteous hunger for this companionship, in view of what was before him.

“My dear fellow, I shall be delighted!” Dick cried, with fine bravado: in his present mood the Bay of Biscay had no terrors for him. “I'll sell my cobs, and lend the dog-cart to the gov'nor, for safe-keeping: then I'm with you—and we'll have just a daisy time of it—sixpenny Nap every night in the smoking-room all the voyage out. And I think we'll have some fun down there, on the other side of the world—yes, I rather think so!—the Caulfield Cup—the Champion Stakes—we'll be able to talk big when we come back——”

“You forget, Dick,” said Summers, in his grave, quiet way: “I'm not coming back.”

Dick's face fell.

"It seems deuced hard luck," he said. "I wonder if there is any necessity for such an awful wrench——"

"Do you think I have not considered that?" the other asked. "Do you think I would leave my girl—never to see her again—if there was any other thing to be done? I heard enough yesterday. Mrs. Hume came out to Crowhurst. She told Nan that they—the rest of them—had no objection to Nan herself; she said she would like to welcome Nan as her daughter-in-law; but I was in the way. Well, I'm going out of the way: isn't that simple, my lad?"

"I wonder what Miss Anne will say to it all?" responded Dick; but as he would not again fall into a gloomy mood—when it was his duty to cheer up his guest and friend who appeared to be in sad straits—he proposed that they should now have coffee and a cigarette, and that Mr. Sum-

mers, who had eaten and drunk nothing, should make up for that by dining with him in the evening at the Café de Provence in Regent Street.

During the afternoon these two went about together—to the office of Mr. Summers's lawyer, where Dick sat patiently in an outer room, among the clerks—to the headquarters of certain steamship companies, where they inspected plans of cabins and inquired about dates of sailings—to a telegraph office, where Summers sent a friendly message down to Nan, while Erridge despatched a more business-like communication to the Café de Provence; and so forth; and all the time the younger of the two men was beset by the most conflicting sensations—wonder and joy at the prospect of a visit to Australia in the company of Jim Summers, with some desperately uneasy feeling that this holiday trip was no holiday trip at all, rather that there lay behind it some tragic

catastrophe. And then again he would say to himself: 'Nonsense—the girl will not allow it! She cannot be so incredibly mean. He has done everything for her—lived for her—slaved for her—all these years; and of a sudden she throws him over so that she may marry into a swell family. And Hume: what will he think of a girl capable of doing such a thing? But perhaps those fastidious people are not so fastidious? Crowhurst will sell for a goodish bit; and Jim Summers's daughter will be provided for besides.'

As they sat at dinner—here again Mr. Summers would hardly look at food: nor was the dark and hopeless expression of his face dispelled by all this brilliancy of lights—at dinner Dick was in a more charitable frame of mind.

"We forgot one thing, *mon ami*," said he, cheerfully, "at those steamship offices; we forgot to ask if they make a reduction on your taking a quantity. So much for

two cabins with two berths each : but how much for three cabins with two berths each ? For that's what we shall want if you insist on going a trip to Australia. Do you think Miss Anne will stay behind ?—no fear ! One cabin for you ; one for me ; and one for a young lady by the name of Miss Anne Summers. That's what it'll come to ! ”

Nan's father looked up, half startled ; but only for a second ; his glance fell again, listlessly.

“ I suppose you'd consider it awful cheek,” Dick Erridge continued, “ if I said I understood your daughter better than you did. Elephantine cheek, eh ? Nevertheless, that is my conviction. And I know she will not hear of your leaving England—— ”

“ Man alive ! ” Summers said, peevishly, “ how often must I tell you ! It will be all arranged and over before she has any chance of protesting—— ”

“Yes, and then?” said Dick, boldly. “Advertising in newspapers—inquiry agents—perhaps herself coming out to Australia! And of course she’ll find you as easy as winking; and all this anxiety and trouble gone for nix! As I say, if you’re on for a trip to Australia, I’m on too—and delighted; but don’t let’s go away with any bee of that kind buzzin’ about in our bonnets.”

His guest did not answer; perhaps it was too open and public a place for confidences; perhaps his thoughts were elsewhere.

As they were leaving the restaurant, Summers said suddenly,

“Dick, couldn’t we go to a music hall now?”

Erridge looked surprised, but he answered at once:

“Oh, yes—oh, certainly. Rather too early for the best turns; but there’ll be something going. Let me see, now. There’s the sisters Clovelly——”

“I don’t care what it is—that is of no consequence,” Summers said.

“Then we’ll stroll along to the Troc.—the Troc. or the Empire: we’ll have a look at the bill.”

Yet these two had scarcely the air of diners-out on their way to a music hall—the one plunged in dark reverie, the other doing his best to be communicative and inspiriting, but perhaps becoming a little disheartened. And what surprised Dick Erridge still further was that, when they reached the entrance to the music hall, his companion hung back.

“No,” said he, in the strangest way. “No—I can’t begin just yet—give me breathing-time—I must think about it. Let’s go to your rooms, Dick, and have a quiet hour or two——”

“Right you are!” said Erridge, promptly. “The very thing! Who wants to sit in a music hall at this time of the evening, when the busy little milliners have hardly

got home from their shops yet? We'll come out for some of the later turns at the halls if you like."

They returned to Erridge's rooms—to tobacco and lounging-chairs.

"I'm afraid I'm an awful nuisance to you, Dick," Summers said, rather moodily. "But I sha'n't be in your way for long—I sha'n't be in anybody's way——"

"Oh, come," Dick broke in, without ceremony, "I'm not going to have any talk like that. That is the result of your eating and drinking nothing. Do you think you can live on your pipe alone? Here, old man, here's some Scotch, that will set you up to rights—Scotch and a drop of seltzer—say when."

But Summers paid little heed to these friendly offices on the part of his host; nor did that sombre look lift from his face.

"It's a hard thing I've got before me now, Dick," said he, with his head bent down, "a hard thing, and that's the fact.

But other people have gone through as much—and perhaps for less cause. You don't know what Nan has been to me through these long years—ever since I came back from Australia—and found the little thing looking at me—with her mother's eyes. And now that all the happiness of her life is at stake, I'm not going to hesitate about a trifle more or less. What is it to me? I'm getting to the end—might be whisked off at any moment—so the doctors say; whereas she has all her life before her—and I am her father, her only guardian—I am bound to do what I can for her. I don't say it will be easy. I wouldn't envy any other man in my place. But it's got to be done."

"What has got to be done?" demanded Erridge, forgetting to light his cigarette.

His companion was silent for a time: when he spoke, it was as if there were some weight on his chest, that made his breathing laboured.

"It won't be easy, Dick," he went on. "God knows it won't be an easy thing for me. But then, you see, I've been telling her all along that Crowhurst was only an experiment. I have told her that if it did not answer we might try some other way. I wanted her to start clear—to form her own set of friends and acquaintances—to shape her own life as she thought best—leaving me and my crowd of the old days out. Well, see what has happened. Perhaps it was more or less accidental—his coming about: that can't be helped now. But I know that all her hopes look in one direction—the happiness of the whole of her life has to be decided now—and I tell you it isn't a little thing that's going to keep me back from doing what I can for my Nan."

He drew a long breath, which was more of the nature of a sigh.

"You see, there's where it is. Perhaps you're right, Dick, perhaps she wouldn't

like my going away from England for good, if everything was to be as it is at present ; and I will say as much for young Hume—for I like him—straightforward, free-handed, generous-hearted sort of a chap—and I think if he saw that Nan was cut up about it, he would refuse as well. Now I'm going to make it so that neither of them can refuse. I've thought it all out, my lad—I've threshed it out—and that is the only way. Crowhurst was an experiment, I told you. Very well : I've got to tell Nan that so far as I am concerned it has been a complete failure ; that I am sick-tired of it ; that I'm off to lead my old life again—but away out of England altogether—— ”

Dick jumped from his chair as if he had been shot.

“ So that's it ? ” he cried. “ But I won't have it ! I will tell her ! I will tell her you're only shamming—— ”

And this, too, roused Jim Summers.

“And you call yourself my friend!” he said, sternly. “I tell you my secret in confidence, and you would go and betray me! Sit down!—and listen.” He paused for a second or two, and resumed in quite an altered tone: “Dick, man, Dick, don’t make it harder for me—it will be hard enough! If I have to show Nan that I am dissatisfied with her, and with Crowhurst, and that I’ve only been pretending to be satisfied, it will be something if I can come to you, and talk to you, and tell you that I never was dissatisfied—never with Nan, surely! There was the music hall to-night,” he continued—this usually grave and silent man grown quite pitifully garrulous in his despair and grief. “I meant to have told her I had spent a gay evening in town—with old pals and all the rest of it—and then—then I kind of begged to be let off this once: I’ll have to begin soon enough. And it won’t be easy, Dick—it won’t be easy—to tell Nan

that I have been disappointed with her—disappointed—with Nan!——”

His arm fell on the table, his head sank on his arm, and he burst into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing. Dick, overawed, did not dare to move for a moment or two; then he forced himself to rise and go round the table, and he put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

“Come, come, old man, it isn't so bad as that,” said he. “There must be some other way——”

Summers, as if ashamed of his breakdown, got up and walked to the window; the night world of London was all afire now, with blue-white and golden stars. When he returned to his chair he said, rather sadly:

“There's no other way, Dick. I've threshed it all out. They'll think I'm off to Australia quite happy and content—glad to get away from a kind of life that never suited me. And what does it matter

to me for the short time that can remain?—whereas they have all their life before them—a long life and happiness. That is my forecast for Nan, Dick. She is naturally a happy creature. And when you come back to England, you'll write out to Australia, and tell me how they are getting on—what kind of house they have—and how Nan's looking—and all the news."

Dick did not speak for a little while: then he said:

"It's a devilish rough business you've put before you, old chap. A devilish rough business. I did not know there was a man in this country with nerve enough to tackle such a job—considering the extraordinary affection that has always existed between you two. A mighty rough business. Yes, and I rather think you've got me into a tight place. I'm not quite sure, don't you know, what should be my line. If I don't quite see the necessity of this tremendous martyrdom, what ought I to do? They

might hold me responsible—because I did not tell them——”

“You’re not going to break faith, Dick?” Summers exclaimed, indignantly. “When I have trusted you? No, no, you won’t do that, Dick—give me your word—I know you’ll stick to it——”

Erridge hesitated only for a moment.

“There’s my hand on it,” said he. “You know best. You know best what is necessary. But it’s a terrible business. Somehow—somehow I can’t help thinking——”

“I tell you it is the only way, Dick,” his companion repeated, with a sort of despairing emphasis. “If you only understood the position of affairs. Why, do you know what Nan is resolved on now?—to break off her engagement! She does not know that I know; but I overheard. The chit of a girl!—trying to deceive me!—isn’t it wonderful, Dick, the courage she has! Not a word of what she means to

do ; and when I said to her ‘ Aren’t you troubled about something, Nan ? ’ she said, ‘ Oh, nothing to speak of ’—as if it was some bit of ribbon she had lost, or something gone wrong with her watch. But I knew—I knew. Mrs. Hume asked her if she was prepared to marry into a family that would look down on her father. I wish her answer had not been quite so decisive, you know, Dick—— ”

“ Yes, but what did she say ? ”

“ Oh, she was only too blunt-spoken—she declared she would not—— ”

“ Of course ! Well done ! I could have guessed that ! ” cried the other.

“ Yes, but you see, Dick,” Mr. Summers went on, despondently enough, “ that is only another intimation to me to clear out. She cannot be allowed to break off her engagement. It isn’t a light thing with her. I’ve watched her ; I know her ; I know how sensitive she is ; she wouldn’t say much—her heart might be breaking—

there would be no word. But don't you see how my plan arranges for all this? I quit out—and there's an end of trouble. Those families will be pacified; Nan will have a young husband to take her part and defend her; and if she thinks of me at all——”

“If she thinks of you at all!” Dick interjected.

“If she thinks of me at all, she will say: ‘Oh, well, Dodo is having a fine time of it out there in Australia. Plenty of horses and betting there: no chance of his being tired to death, as he was at Crowhurst.’”

“And are you going to tell her you were tired to death at Crowhurst?” asked Dick, regarding him curiously.

“I’ve hardly made up my mind yet,” he answered, with some appearance of effort, “precisely what I’m going to say. It’s rather difficult—as you may suppose. But the first plunge will be to-morrow afternoon, when I get down—and that’s what I wish

was over. The first plunge—and it will be easier after, I dare say; and then when you and I are well away from England, Dick, then, you see, there will be nothing for one to think of but the settled and happy state of affairs that has been left behind. That will be the reward. It will be rather rough, as you say, just before getting off—but afterwards—afterwards there will be makings-up.” Then of a sudden he altered his tone. “Come, my good lad, you mustn’t let me pester you in this fashion. I’ve ruined a whole day for you. Let’s hear something about yourself. Are you satisfied with your rooms now that you’ve got them all fixed up?—they seem to me to be very smart.”

But Dick was far too seriously occupied with what he had heard to think of turning to his own small surroundings. His thoughts were rather about Crowhurst, and about Nan Summers, and the pathetic sacrifice that was about to be made for her.

And then accidentally something was mentioned about the vicarage, and Nan's father was easily led into talking of the girl's earlier years. It was an inexhaustible theme—her pretty ways—her letters—her delight in running races on Clifton Down—a hundred trifles that appeared to him of absorbing interest; and he had talked himself into quite a cheerful humour when he found that it was past midnight and that he must get to his hotel. Dick went downstairs with his guest, and a hansom was called.

“Very well,” said he, “I will come up and breakfast with you at nine; and then we can talk over those cabins and our outfit for the voyage—if all that you say has got to be done.”

“And you will stand by me, Dick?” Summers said, earnestly, as the doors of the hansom were being shut.

“You trust me, old chap,” was the answer. “You're just the one man in this

country I'd stand by, through thick and thin."

But Dick, as he thoughtfully ascended the dark stairs again, said to himself:

"Poor old boy! He has a firm nerve—a nerve as splendid as his splendid physique. But how is he going to make that first plunge to-morrow—with Nan looking at him?"

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST PLUNGE AND LAST.

PERHAPS Sidney Hume had borrowed courage and comfort from his beloved Greeks; perhaps, to suit his present needs and circumstances, he had boldly constructed for himself all sorts of subversive social theories; at all events, as he now strode away out to Crowhurst there was no kind of doubt or hesitation in his manner. And it was a morning to inspire confidence and hope—a morning filled with beautiful things and gracious sounds: the stirring and rustling elms showed arrowy gleams of blue through their topmost branches; here and there the sunlight burned on some strip of golden charlock or

on the softened red of poppies among the upland wheat; there was a distant, half-muffled tinkling of sheep-bells; nearer at hand were the voices of children scrambling after wild roses and calling to each other through the hedge. He made sure that on such a day Nan would be out in the garden—the perfect tints of her complexion rendered still more transparent by the surrounding luminous air.

But when he arrived at Crowhurst, and opened the white gate and passed in, she was nowhere visible amid that wide profusion of blooms and colours. He went along to the house, and rang the bell. The little maid-servant who appeared looked frightened.

“Mr. Summers has gone up to town, sir,” she said.

“Oh, then I will see Miss Anne,” he responded, promptly.

Jane faltered for a moment: she sympathised with young lovers—and had no mind for the delivery of cruel messages.

“Miss Anne,” she said, with deprecating eyes—“Miss Anne—would rather be excused, sir——”

He stared at her in amazement.

“Why, what is the matter? She is not ill?”

“No, sir.”

“She is not in her own room?”

“N—no, sir.”

“Oh, but then I must see her,” he said. “Go and tell her I must see her. I cannot take any such message except from herself.”

The girl hesitated, having no further instructions; while he, without more ado, stepped into the nearest room, the door of which was open. The next instant he found there was some figure betwixt him and the light: it was Nan—up by the window—and she was regarding him with the strangest apprehension. Nay, she seemed to shrink away from him, to retreat from his quick advance and eager outstretched hands; and when he would have

caught her to him, the more surely to question her eyes, she did not yield to his embrace, she withdrew herself rather, and remained standing before him in the greatest confusion, her looks downcast, her fingers tremulous.

“Nan,” said he, utterly stupefied, “what is all this?”

And then she forced herself to answer. “Sidney,” said she, in a low, constrained voice, “why did you—not take my message? For—for that will be the best thing now—the best thing for every one—if you stay away—if you never come here again——”

For a second he was too astounded to speak.

“Then you do not love me!” he exclaimed, in accents of bitter reproach. “That is what you have got to say—that is the real message you could not very well leave for me at the door! I understand. It is clear enough. You have changed rather quickly, it is true——”

“ Sidney, Sidney,” she cried, “ do not talk to me like that ! If we have to say good-bye, let it not be that way ! ”

She managed to raise her eyes to his, and they were full of a piteous longing and appeal ; the magnetism of his presence seemed to draw her towards him ; the next moment, through some inexplicable impulse, these two had come together, his arms were tightly round her, and he was impetuously kissing her forehead, her eyelids, her lips.

“ I love you, Nan. Do you love me ? ” he was murmuring to her. “ For these are the only things that concern us. Everything else is trivial and of no account. My dearest and best, do you love me ? Tell me ! ”

“ You know, Sidney,” she made answer, and now her face was hidden in his bosom, and her trembling fingers clung to him. “ You know. Why need I tell you ? And whatever happens you will never forget what I have confessed to you—promise me

that! No, you cannot forget! But it has been all a mistake from the beginning; I can see it; my eyes have been opened. And if we have to part now—well—well—you must promise me, Sidney, that you will never doubt but that I loved you—loved you truly——”

She burst into a fit of crying; and of course he tried to comfort her; but all his soothing and endearing phrases were lost in blank bewilderment. At last he said to her, with gentle firmness:

“Nan, sit down, and tell me distinctly what all this means. What has happened? I know that, whatever it is, it is immaterial; what concerns us is firmly enough established; and perhaps I may not ask you again, though it sounds so sweet to hear you say it. Now tell me what all this is about.”

It was rather a disconnected story she had to tell, of Mrs. Hume's visit, her representations and her challenge, and of her own

resolve to remain with her father. Nor was it altogether a tearful tale. If her lips were tremulous they were also proud as she gave him to understand that where her father would be scorned could be no place for her father's daughter. Meanwhile Sidney's face had become overclouded.

"I don't want to quarrel with the Mater," said he. "And you don't want me to quarrel with her, Nan, I am sure. But she is a woman who has been accustomed to have her own way; and she is resolute—and perhaps not over-scrupulous when she is determined to gain her ends; and clearly enough she came out to frighten you with this bogie simply because she has made up her mind I must marry—somebody else. It is a mere bogie, all the same. Why should you, or I, or your father, pay the least heed to what my relatives may be pleased to think of him? We do not ask their opinion. We need not go near them——"

“ Ah, but if you were to cut yourself off from your family on my account—— ” she was beginning to say, sadly enough, when he interrupted her.

“ One moment, Nan. Do you imagine I have not taken all these things into consideration? And as for one’s family, the duty one is supposed to owe one’s family is a very common superstition, but it is a superstition none the less. You may owe duty and gratitude to your father and mother for looking after you when you were young; but in what way are you beholden to a whole lot of kinsfolk who never cared twopence about you? If you choose a friend, you are bound to stick to him—that is right enough; but you never had any choice of your relatives; they were established for you—and that for the most part before you were born. And so, my dearest, my darling Nan, when you and I marry, we will begin and choose our own circle of friends; and those who are well

inclined towards us, we shall welcome ; and those who are ill inclined, they can stay away. Simple, isn't it ? Surely between us you and I can muster up sufficient courage and independence for that ! We don't invite anybody's opinion of you, or of your father, or of our domestic arrangements. When we want advice, we may ask for it, but not till then. And so you see, Nan, you must not be scared by any bogie."

"When I listen to you, Sidney," she said, with grateful eyes, "everything seems so hopeful ; you are so brave ; you put aside things——"

"The things that do not concern us, yes," he said ; and he reached over and took her hand, that lay in her lap, and held it firmly. "For I have told you what is material to us two ; and your eyes—your beautiful eyes—have answered me that you understood, that I could trust you. And you won't be scared by any more bogies ?

And you won't send me another such message out to the front door?——”

Her face became slightly suffused.

“I don't precisely know when my father is coming down from town,” she said, “but—but I will write—and tell you.”

It was a delicate intimation to him that she would rather not have him call again until her father had returned to Crowhurst; and perhaps also it suggested that his present visit had lasted long enough. At all events he rose and took his leave—it was a protracted leave-taking, to be sure, for amid all these tender protestations and ineffable love-glances there were still lingering doubts and apprehensions that he had to strive to banish away from that wistful young face—and presently he had left the house and was making for the Oxford Road and the Fair Mile. And if he startled the silence of the lanes and woods by repeating aloud certain of Nan's phrases—‘down from town,’ and the like—trying to recall

the strange fascination of the lengthened diphthong? But his voice was not so musical as Nan's.

Mr. Summers arrived unexpectedly in the afternoon, driving out from Henley in an open fly. At the sound of wheels, Nan flew to the door.

"Dodo," she cried, "why did you not let me know you were coming—and I should have driven in to the station to meet you?"

"How could I tell? How could I tell when I should get away?" he said, impatiently, as he turned to settle with the cabman.

"And the sling—you have got rid of it at last!" she said, with joyful and approving eyes. "I am so glad! You are like yourself again!"

"Did you think I was going to wear it for ever?" he asked, in a peevish kind of manner: he did not tell her that for some time back he had worn the unnecessary sling merely as an excuse for lingering about the

house and garden, so that she and her lover might go away driving by themselves.

Well, Nan was not used to being spoken to in this dissatisfied, fretful fashion; but she concluded that her father had been tired or worried in town; so she took him by the arm and led him into the dining-room, and placed an easy-chair for him.

"You shall have a cup of tea in two minutes, Dodo," she said.

"I don't want any wish-wash: get me some brandy and soda," he answered her, shortly.

Nor even yet did she show any surprise.

"Oh, yes, yes," she said, and with a blithe air she went away to the sideboard and the cellaret.

Her father's eyes followed her in a curiously furtive way. He seemed to be afraid of her—or of something. And when she turned, he quickly averted his look.

"Yes, you seem a little tired, Dodo," she said, as she brought the things to the table.

“But I hope you had a pleasant time in London? Of course you saw Mr. Erridge? And what about his new rooms?”

“Oh, yes, we had a sufficiently pleasant time: something doing there,” he said, in a morose kind of way. “Dick’s rooms are in the middle of everything—theatres, music halls; there’s some sort of life there—something going on. The fact is, Nan,” he proceeded—but singularly enough his eyes were now fixed on the carpet—he never once raised them—and the tumbler she had placed beside him remained untouched. “I must get up a little oftener to London. There’s no use fossilising one’s self for ever and ever in the country. The country is all very well for some people; but there’s others who like a little bit of town thrown in—for the sake of change. And I’ve been wondering whether Dick couldn’t get me a bedroom on that same floor, so that I could run up to it from time to time.”

She looked somewhat concerned ; but still she said,

“ Yes, that would be more convenient for you than going to a hotel, wouldn’t it, Dodo ? ”

“ I’ve been thinking I would put a few things together,” he continued—still avoiding her anxious gaze. “ A few things in a portmanteau—and I could take the portmanteau up to-morrow, and leave it in Dick’s chambers, until he and I could have a look round. A single room would do ; but like his own, in the middle of things—where there’s some life and stir and amusement going on. I think that will be the best way—and the sooner the better.”

He rose, and went out, shutting the door behind him ; and she did not attempt to follow. When he got into the garden, he walked along the pathway as if haunted by something ; and when he reached the summer-house, and sat down there, he

looked back in a watchful and stealthy fashion—and with anguish in his eyes.

“ My God, I cannot do it ! ” he murmured to himself, in a kind of despair. “ It is too much—too much to ask of mortal man.”

He did not see her again before dinner ; he was busy packing his portmanteau. At dinner she seemed chilled in manner, and vaguely apprehensive ; and yet she strove to be a cheerful companion as well as she could.

“ Where did you dine last night, Dodo ? ” she asked, pleasantly.

“ At the Café de Provence,” he answered her.

“ I hope they gave you a very nice dinner,” she said.

“ Oh, I should think so ! ” he said, with a fine affectation of jollity. “ Something like ! All kinds of unexpected things—things that tempt you to eat. Oh, yes, very capital it was : bright lights—fine company—plenty of life and go—an ex-

cellent dinner : you may trust Dick to find his way about ! ”

She was silent for a space ; then she said, rather piteously — and her fingers, that appeared to have no use for knife or fork, were shaking a little—

“ Dodo—I wish—you would sometimes tell me—what things you would like best for dinner. I know I don’t do very well—and—and I would like to do better—if you would only tell me—I will try to do better—and not send you away to London—— ”

In spite of herself tears sprang to her lashes ; she quickly left her seat, and crossed the room—her head downcast, her cheeks streaming ; and then the door was shut behind her. Nor did he go after her, and pet and pacify her, and bring her back with soothing words and caresses. He remained with his hands clenched on the arms of his chair. There was a hollow and haggard look in his eyes.

Next morning Dick, who had received

a telegram, was in his rooms awaiting his friend.

“Dick, my lad,” Summers said, as he took the nearest seat handy, and sunk rather wearily into it, “this is about killing me. I don’t think I can go on with it. It just rives my heart-strings. And to see Nan crying—to see Nan crying—why, her latest fancy is that I want to come to London because the dinners at Crowhurst are not good enough! Dinners! There’s many a dinner I’ve gone without only to get a far-off glimpse of Nan when she was at the vicarage——”

“Look here, old man,” said Erridge, “I’m going to ask you a question—straight from the shoulder. Is all this that you are doing necessary—or absolute foolishness? Mind you, I’m not drawing back; I’m not funkig; if you are off for Australia, I’m with you. But why? Why? If that fellow has an ounce of pluck in him, he’ll marry Miss Anne, and tell his fine relatives

and friends to go first-class express to the devil. That's what a man would do; perhaps it isn't what a fellow brought up amongst parsons and colleges would do. Why shouldn't he and Nan—Miss Anne, I mean—and you make up a small household together——”

“Dick, man, why do you talk like that?” Mr. Summers interposed, angrily. “Can't I get you to understand? Can't I drive it into your head? A fine thing for a young fellow like that to separate himself from his family, and all because of a love-affair—very fine for a time; but if anything unfortunate happened—look at Nan's responsibility—he would know, and she would know, that she was responsible for cutting him adrift from his own people. Whereas, if she is taken into the family, and made safe and secure by all of them? And that's how it will be, Dick—that's how it will be,” he continued, eagerly. “I've made the first plunge, in a kind of

a way ; and there isn't much more ; soon I shall be out of the road altogether ; and Nan will be safe and happy—for she can make friends, the clever creature that she is—yes, yes, she will win them all over to her—and they'll be as proud of her—oh, you will see ! And you must let me know, Dick—I shall count upon hearing from you—and you will tell me little things about her—never mind how little, never mind how insignificant, you know : what kind of bonnet she was wearing when you saw her—the colour of her gloves—anything—the smallest trifles—so that I can figure out Nan for myself——”

“ Oh, very well,” said Dick, unconcernedly, “ if it is to be, it is. And I've been hurrying things along. Ran down to Tilbury to look over the ship : a ripper, I can tell you !—the saloon as swell as the *Troc.* or the *Empire*—golden gods and goddesses, as large as life, perched up in the air——” He paused for a second. “ I

say, I hope they're pretty securely fixed. If there was a bit of a sea on, and if one of those golden goddesses were to come flying out of the clouds and hit you on the head, she'd just about bounce you into kingdom come." Then he took up a piece of paper. "See here: I've been counting out what dress shirts and chokers I shall want—rather a tall order, ain't it! What a nuisance it is there's no washing done on board! And how I'm going to stow away all those shirts——"

"But you're not going to dress for dinner every evening?" his companion asked.

"What else?" responded Dick, with wide eyes. "What else? I don't want to be taken for a bagman out on a spree. There'll be dances and concerts: you can't ask a girl for a dance—you can't escort a lady up to the piano—if you've a cut-away coat on. Might as well wear a billy-cock. Why, man, I'm taking three dress suits

with me: do you think I'd trust a Kangaroo tailor? Besides, there's sure to be some officers' wives on board; and they know a thing or two; they have got eyes; and at least I'm going to pay them the compliment of grooming myself well."

"Did you say I could join the Plymouth express at Reading?" Mr. Summers inquired, in almost a listless fashion.

"As far as I can make out from Bradshaw," his friend answered. "But I will get to know for certain."

"I'm not going down to Crowhurst again, Dick," the other said, "until the day before we leave. I can't bear it. You don't know what it is to me to see Nan with tears in her eyes—it's no use—I can't stand it—I'd own up the whole thing—and ruin all her chances of happiness through a moment's weakness. And it's terrible to find Nan looking frightened—frightened of me, Dick!—Nan, frightened of me! But it will soon be over now," he added, rising,

as if to thrust off some weight that was choking him, "it will soon be all over—and the way left clear for everybody. Well, what are your plans meantime?"

"At present," said Dick, also rising, "I'm going to take you down with me to Cornhill, to see about the things you'll need for the voyage. I've been making inquiries—and I can tell you we shall want all the little tricks and dodges. If what I hear is true, the Red Sea just now will be a very good imitation of 'Tophet with the cold tap shut off."

So these two went out into the roaring world of London: here at least, for one of them, was a mechanical duty, that could be easily faced—nay, that could be faced with some sense of relief.

Late one night Mr. Summers was alone in the dining-room at Crowhurst, and he was writing a letter. Or rather he was about to write it; for although there were

the materials on the table, and although he had sat himself down once or twice, he could not bring himself to begin. He would get up again, with a heavy sigh; and would pace to and fro, his open palms pressed on his chest, as if there were some deep-seated pain there. But at length he resolutely attacked that sheet of paper.

“Dear Nan,” he wrote, in his stiff and laboured hand—carefully dotting every *i* and crossing every *t* as he went along, though his fingers shook not a little. “The truth must out at last. I’m sick-tired of Crowhurst. There’s no use pretending any longer. I’ve had enough——”

The pen dropped from his hand; he rose, and began pacing up and down the room again.

“God help me,” he groaned to himself, “will Nan believe that! But she must believe it—she must believe it!”

He went back, and took up his pen.

“There is no blame to any one. But

I told you all along that Crowhurst was only an experiment; and now that it has been tried, it is a complete failure—as far as I am concerned. It isn't the kind of life that suits me, however much I may have been making believe. And so I'm off. And I'm off for good, too, never to return to England. It's the only way. You've been brought up different, you see, Nan; and I wanted you to make your own set of friends; and that's all right; I'm leaving you quite free—and I am sure you will be happy. Only you must not bother about me. I'm off to the other side of the world, where there's something going on that I'm better familiar with than the life we've been living here; and I'm not coming back—nothing would tempt me to come back. So it's no good your writing, or advertising, or anything of that kind. You go your own road; you'll find plenty of friends of your own way of upbringing; and I'm going mine—there will be some of my

old pals out there, I dare say. And I don't wish to be inquired about; I forbid it; and as your father I have the right to forbid it. You'd better go at once to Mr. Morris; you will find that I have left him full instructions; he will look after you, until you get married; and then you can tell him whether you want to remain at Crowhurst, or to sell the place. I've had to take a lump sum with me—not very much, but I think it will last my time—and I wouldn't have done that only I want no means of communication left open. I'm off for good and all; and your best plan is to forget that I ever existed——”

For a moment or two the laboured writing ceased; and he sank back in his chair. Then he forced himself to continue:

“—and you will be happy with your young husband. And you must remember that his relatives will then be your relatives; and you must make yourself agree-

able to them ; and you must show a little gratitude to those who are kind to you ; and they are sure to be so. I think that is all. I should like to have said good-bye ; but it would have been painful ; and you might have tried to interfere and put me off—whereas my plans are *fixed*, and I *rely upon you to respect them*. 'So I will say good-bye on paper, Nan ; and I wish you, my dear lass, every joy and happiness through a long life—indeed, indeed I do.

“YOUR LOVING FATHER.”

He started : there was some slight creak. What if Nan herself were to appear—at the open door—challenging him, defying him to go until he had confessed the truth ? But he listened intently, and there was nothing further : it had been merely one of those nameless sounds that haunt the stillness of a house at night. He folded the sheet of paper, and put it in an envelope, and addressed it ; and then, with

a long and lingering look round—for there were many memories attaching to this room, and he was leaving it for ever—he took up the letter, and extinguished the lamp, and passed into the hall. Here a candle was burning; he carried that with him as he stealthily ascended the stairs.

And yet he need not have been so cautious in his movements, for Nan was accustomed to hear his footsteps about the house, and around the house too, at late hours, in his capacity of ‘bull-dog.’ Nevertheless, it was as a thief that he stole by her room and entered his own; and noiselessly and with extremest care did he pull out a drawer, to take therefrom an oblong wooden box, which apparently he was about to place in a handbag that stood on the dressing-table. But first he opened and glanced into the box, to see that his treasures were safe. They were simple things. Two packets of letters, each one of them carefully marked ‘From Nan,’ with the date

attached ; some envelopes containing scraps of autumn foliage ; photographs of Nan at different stages of her school-girl life ; and similar keepsakes and souvenirs. Trifling things : but it was a lover's casket that he put into that small hand-bag.

And then he was ready to come away ; and as stealthily he left the room, and stepped along the narrow landing. But he could not pass Nan's door. He could not pass Nan's door without pausing to bid her some kind of mute, despairing farewell. And he held his breath tightly, so that she could hear no sound of the sobbing that shook his powerful frame. His eyes were piteous ; and the hot tears coursing down his cheeks told of his agony of suffering ; but Nan was all unaware. For her, sweet sleep and happy dreams : for him, the lone night—and wide seas—and distant ways. “ Nan,” he could have cried to her, “ is the letter too cruel ? But it had to be, my lass, it had to be ! ”

He stole downstairs. He put the candle on the hall table, and went forward to open the front door. But when he returned, to blow out the light, he found accidentally lying there a lace scarf that Nan sometimes threw round her head and neck when he and she went for an evening stroll. And perhaps some recollection of these placid evening rambles overcame him; with both hands he caught up this bit of finery, and pressed it to his lips, and passionately kissed it again and again; and now Nan might well have heard the violence of his sobbing, but that she was far away in the vague realms of sleep. Then, with uncertain footsteps, he went out into the white moonlit world; he passed along the path; at the gate he stopped for one long last look—murmuring under his breath ‘Good-bye, Nan—good-bye, my brave lass—and God bless you!’ When he turned away he knew that the first plunge and the last had been taken: it was all over now.

Some five hundred yards distant—down towards the Oxford Road—and by the side of a dark beechwood, a waggonette was waiting, the lamps, which were almost unnecessary on such a night, bringing out the horses' necks and heads into bold relief.

“Here I am, Dick,” Mr. Summers said, and he got up beside his friend.

They drove away in absolute silence. For though Dick Erridge was a fool, he was not fool enough to try to say anything to this man, who had as it were come through the valley of the shadow of death.

CHAPTER V.

A GULF BETWEEN.

It was a brilliant morning, fresh, and clear, and sweet-scented ; and Nan came downstairs singing—a gay air—‘ The British Grenadiers ’ it was—though she did not pay much attention to the words.

“ Dodo,” she called aloud in the empty passage, “ where are you ? ”

There was no response ; so in the same heedless manner she went along and entered the dining-room, where breakfast was laid. There was a letter on the table ; and at a glance she recognised the handwriting.

“ A letter from Dodo ? ” she said to herself ; and she took it up curiously ; and did not open it at once. It was an unusual

kind of thing. But he had not been quite himself of late : perhaps this was some explanation—or even some bit of shy apology for unintentional brusqueness—some appeal for a re-establishment of the old familiar and affectionate terms.

At last she tore open the envelope, and unfolded the sheets of paper. The very first words that met her eyes were like a blow ; she became ghastly pale ; and before she had got to the end of those cramped and formal lines she was shivering from head to foot. She could not comprehend it all at once—could not believe, perhaps, that any such terrible thing was possible ; but through the midst of this sudden stupor of bewilderment came the one wild, desperate hope that even yet she might be able to find her father, and fall at his feet, and clasp his knees, and implore him not to go away from her. Breathless, benumbed as she was, she managed to get quickly to the open door.

“Jane!—Jane!” she called—and there was something in that shrill and piteous cry that brought the frightened maidservant instantly to her. “Where is my father? When did he leave? What did he say? Did he give you this letter?——”

“But I haven’t seen the master at all this morning, Miss Anne,” the girl said. “I thought he hadn’t come down——”

At this Nan hurried by her and rushed upstairs—to her father’s room. It was empty. The bed had not been slept in; there was no sign of any hurried departure. All this had been planned, then?—and Dodo was gone.

Slowly, mechanically, as one in a dream, she descended the stairs again, and went into the dining-room, and sate down on the couch by the window: she was trembling, and chilled, and tearless. The letter still lay on the table: she stared at it—as if she were staring into some unknown future, not yet realising all that it meant. The

little maidservant, after a few moments of hesitation, ventured to follow her young mistress into the room.

“I hope there’s nothing wrong, Miss Anne?” she timidly asked.

“Nothing that you could understand, Jane,” was the answer. And then she went on, in a dejection of despair that was more heartrending than any violent outburst of grief: “My father has flung me away from him—that is all. He has cast me away. And he is never coming back to Crowhurst any more: it is all a wreck and ruin now.”

“Nay, don’t say that, Miss Anne!” the girl pleaded, with quick sympathy. “It can’t be so bad as that. If you’ll tell me where to find him, I’ll go and fetch him back: the master won’t need much pressing to come back to you, Miss Anne—that I’m certain-sure of!”

“He will never come back—never—never,” she said, in the same strangely

unimpassioned way. And then she continued—for here at least, in the new and appalling loneliness that now surrounded her, was a human being who could pity her, if that was all: “I—I do not know what has happened—I cannot tell yet. . . . If I had guessed that he was dissatisfied, that he was thinking of going away, I might have asked him what was wrong. . . . But I was blind—I did not see—I did not see—and he must have been hiding something from me. . . . And now—now there is an end. If only he had said there was some time I could look forward to, I should not have cared—I should have waited and watched—perhaps hoping he might come a little sooner—out of kindness and forgiveness. But there’s nothing of that sort possible now; and I shall never see him again—though I waited and hoped through months and years—the long, long, empty years!” She turned aside, and laid her arms on the cushion, and bowed down

her head. "Go away now, Jane," she said, wearily. "I want to think. I want to think what I have to do now—since he has cast me off—and left me."

Jane stood uncertain—distracted between obedience and commiseration.

"But I must bring you your breakfast, Miss Anne——"

"I don't want any—I want to be alone," the girl said.

"A cup of tea, then——"

"I only want to be alone, Jane—leave me, Jane—leave me—I must be alone."

And Jane went away; but it was with a sense of responsibility that drove her to speedy action. She did not understand what had happened; but she could not have her mistress left in this condition; she would call in the aid of wiser counsel than her own. And to whom should she instinctively turn but to the young lover: surely it was his place to appear, with succour in time of need? She asked for no

permission, no authority. She went straight-way to the boy-groom, and told him that he must at once get the phaeton ready, and drive in to Henley, and bring out Mr. Hume; and she called for old John the gardener to help. She would have sent a note, of urgent entreaty; but Jane was not good at penmanship, nor even at the expression of thoughts that were clear enough in her own mind: failing that course, she entrusted the lad with a message which she thought would have sufficient weight. As if it wanted much to bring Sidney Hume out to Crowhurst!

And in an incredibly short space of time the phaeton had sped on its errand and returned, bringing the young man; and here was Jane awaiting him, in the passage, and silently pointing to the dining-room door. He tapped gently. There was no reply. Then he made bold to enter: Nan was still lying on the couch, her face hidden. But when she heard some one come into the

room, she raised her head; she saw who this was; she sprang to her feet, and advanced towards him, and threw herself into his arms whilst she burst into a fit of wild, ungovernable weeping.

“Sidney, Sidney, have you come to me in my disgrace!” she cried, amid her choking sobs. And she continued, quite incoherently: “Don’t you know that I am a castaway—that he has flung me from him—and left me. You should not have come here, Sidney—I am disgraced—I am a castaway—you should not come near one that is disgraced. I was too proud and too happy—but I have been stricken down—and it’s Dodo—it’s Dodo—that has struck me—and the blow—is hard——”

Nay, she could not proceed, through the vehemence of her distress; and in vain he tried to stem this torrent of emotion that had been too long pent up, and now sought natural relief.

“My dearest, do you mean to say your

father would do anything to hurt or harm you?—no, no, that is not believable!” he remonstrated; and he drew her head still closer to him, and smoothed the soft golden-brown hair, and endeavoured to still that frantic sobbing.

She disengaged herself—she took up the letter from the table.

“Read it,” she said, “and then—then leave me, Sidney—you need not come near a castaway—a castaway!”—and there-with she returned to the couch again, and buried her face in the cushion: she seemed completely overwhelmed in her misery—and careless as to what might happen now.

He read the letter—slowly, and not without amazement; and then he went over to her, and put his hand on her shoulder—the prostrate figure was all trembling and quivering.

“Nan, listen to me,” he said, bending down to her. “I don’t believe half of

what is in this letter. It is quite possible he may have been a bit tired, and restless, and longing for a change; but I know what he will tire of soonest of all, and that is being away from you. You'll find him coming back to you——”

“Never, never!” she moaned—and it was with difficulty he could make out her broken sentences. “I know better than that—I know why he *struck* me—it was to make sure I should not seek to get him back—it was—it was to tell me I was cast off for good and all. Sidney, what could I have done that was so wrong?—what should I have done otherwise? I wanted him to bring his old friends and companions to the house. I wanted him to go oftener up to London, for amusement. I offered to go to race-meetings with him. I did—what I could! . . . Oh, no,—oh, no!” she cried in another passion of tears. “I did not. I was too happy—too selfish. I did not notice that he was dissatisfied. When

I came to Crowhurst—it was all a wonder to me—I thought it was to last for ever—I never thought that Dodo would—would fling me away from him——” But here her utterance was quite choked with sobs—in total abandonment of despair.

He was in great perplexity. He went and read the letter again. Then he returned to her.

“Nan,” said he, gently, “you must not give way like this. Something has to be done. I suppose the Mr. Morris mentioned in the letter is your father’s lawyer: now would you like me to go up to town and see him, and make inquiries, and get the latest information?——”

“Yes—yes,” she answered him.

“And there’s another thing, Nan,” he went on. “You cannot live here by yourself—the loneliness would kill you. And yet it is hard to say off-hand what had best be done. Now there is a very dear friend of mine—the sister of a former college-chum

—and about the best and nicest woman in the world: may I bring her out to stay with you for a few days until we can arrange something? I know she will come; she is always ready to help any one in distress—it's a kind of profession she has, and they seem to keep her pretty well employed. May I bring her out to you, Nan?"

"Whatever you think right, Sidney," she murmured—the tempest of her grief was dying down, leaving her wholly exhausted.

"Well, I'll go now," he said. "Mind you keep up your heart. Your father's daughter ought to have courage."

He stooped and kissed her cheek and said good-bye; then he went and found Jane, and gave her a lot of instructions about her young mistress; and finally, discovering that the phaeton was still standing there, in case it might be wanted, he got the lad to drive him forthwith into Henley. Mr. Morris's address he had written down on the back of an envelope.

But mid-day trains between Henley and London are few; and it was not until the afternoon that he reached the lawyer's office. Mr. Morris easily recognised the position of this emissary, of whom, indeed, he had heard; and spoke to him freely enough—especially about the careful fashion in which Mr. Summers had regulated all his affairs before leaving the country; yet on the one point on which he most wanted information, Sidney could find none at all.

“I vaguely gathered from him,” the lawyer said, “that he meant to sail from Plymouth this morning; and I guessed his destination to be Australia. That you could easily find out, at the offices of the steamship companies—unless he booked his passage under an assumed name; and that is not likely. But,” continued this small, suave, sandy-haired man, regarding Sidney with a peculiar look of scrutiny, “I understood from him that he meant to leave strict injunctions there should be no

inquiries made—no attempt to discover his whereabouts——”

“That is so—that is so,” said Sidney, with downcast eyes. “I have read his letter to his daughter. It is rather hard and blunt—perhaps partly by intention, if he wanted to forbid her trying to follow him. I don’t understand it quite. He was excessively fond of her—an affection I have never seen equalled; and he might have bade her good-bye in rather more kindly terms; he might have concealed a little of his impatience with the life at Crowhurst—unless, indeed, that was his motive, to prevent any possible renewal of their old relations. If that was his intention, he has succeeded. She is humbled to the ground; considers herself a castaway—disgraced and despised; she even talks of his having struck her, but I am sure that was not in his mind. I am sure that could not be in his mind: I have seen those two together. I think he would have cut off his left hand

to save her the scratch of a pin. And naturally she wasn't prepared ; that is why she shrinks as if under a blow ; I don't think he could have meant it to be quite so hard." He was silent for a little while. " So that is all you have to tell me ? "

" That is all I can tell you of Mr. Summers," the lawyer said. " But there is much about his business affairs that I should like to lay before Miss Summers, any day she happens to be in town. I should like her to know precisely how she stands ; and then she could tell me whether she would prefer that the one or two mortgages I hold, and the securities at Mr. Summers's bankers, should remain where they are—to save her trouble."

" Yes," said the young man, absently, as he rose to take his leave. " She will call on you, no doubt ; but I fear it will be a little while before she can bring herself to think of such things."

And then he went off to Wygram Street,

Russell Square, to seek out his friends Stephen and Constance Weguelin. Stephen had been a college friend and close companion of his, but had now drifted into journalism, and was engaged on one of the great morning papers; Constance, in the intervals of household duties, also wrote—for magazines and the like—but mostly her leisure was devoted to work of a more practical and beneficent kind. Constance he found in the drawing-room, which was somewhat dingy in the pale mist of Bloomsbury; Stephen was upstairs in his study, forging thunderbolts.

This rather elderly, rather plain-featured woman, with the gracious smile and tender eyes, granted his prayer at once, the moment she had heard his story.

“Yes, indeed, Sidney,” said she (for they were on very intimate terms), “I will go with the greatest pleasure; but don’t you think it would be rather late by the time we should reach there to-night? Why not

stay and dine with us ; and we can put you up in a way ; and I will go down with you to-morrow morning. It is quite a long time since we had a chat—and it is only through Stephen that I have heard from time to time of your Dionysiac book.”

He could hardly press her for greater haste ; he accepted. And when everything had been explained and arranged about Nan and Crowhurst, he naturally turned to other topics.

“ Has Stephen got accustomed yet to wielding these tremendous powers ? ” he asked.

“ Oh, as for that,” she answered, laughing, “ Stephen is only mortal : he is not omnipotent. There’s a good deal of difference, sometimes, between what a leader-writer would like to say and what he is allowed to say. And that space I call the debateable land ; I am allowed occasionally to wander there, and listen. I listen to the leaders that don’t appear—— ”

“It is very kind of you.”

“I can assure you they are ever so much more amusing than those that do. Poor Stephen!—yesterday it was one of those perpetual Irish subjects; and he was angry; and he began ‘Even in the cradle the first articulate cry of an Irish child is for a Government grant.’ But you didn’t see that this morning, did you? That was lost in the debateable land. Well, whether he has to trim his sails or not, I think Stephen’s political writing is far and away the most brilliant that is appearing in any of the papers. I recognise him in a moment—even if he has been late at the office—and I don’t know the subject when I open the paper——”

But here the object of this eulogy—a slight, stooping, tallish young man, with a bloodless face, teeth prominent when he smiled, and pleasant grey eyes—came into the room, and the conversation had to be changed.

It proved to be on the whole a most cheerful evening; for the present crisis in Sidney's life, as hardly a subject for general talk, was put aside by tacit acquiescence; and at dinner—a simple meal—they found plenty of other things to discourse about: old college friends and their doings and driftings, new books and literary rumours, and more especially a voyage to the Greek Archipelago from which the Weguelins had recently returned. It was a treat given to Constance by this younger brother of hers; and she had come back overbrimming with gratitude, and wild with enthusiasm over everything connected with the sea and ships.

“After dinner, Sidney,” said her brother, with a laugh, “Constance must show you her cabin. Do you know what the maniac has done?—turned her room into a cabin—everything complete—upper and lower berths, circular wash-stand fixed to the wall, racks for bottles and tumblers—a

swinging lantern—two port-holes instead of a window—as like the real thing as ever you saw. And in the morning I hear her call to the maid who brings her her cup of tea—‘Where are we this morning, Susan?’ and the answer is sometimes ‘Just off Cape Matapan, miss,’ or ‘Within sight of Crete, miss,’ or ‘Getting close to Malta now, miss.’ Coustonce has given her a chart, with perfect liberty; and the reckless way the creature skips and bounds about is beautiful: one morning she will announce ‘The Gulf of Ægina, miss’—she hasn’t been taught to say ‘Hyegghina’—rather too difficult for the Cockney larynx—and twenty-four hours after it will be ‘Cape St. Vincent, miss!’——”

“What a mournful disillusion,” Sidney said, “to open your eyes and find the port-holes looking out on a lot of Bloomsbury houses.”

“But I don’t,” she responded gallantly. “That is precisely what doesn’t happen.

For I sleep in the lower berth, and when I waken in the morning and look up, the ports are simply circles of sky ; and sometimes, you know, there is a tinge of blue—and then you can be just wherever you want to be. I was sailing past Troy this morning—Troy, and the long, yellow shores, and the tiny wind-mills.”

There seemed to be no end to her reminiscences and experiences ; and these appeared to have been all enjoyable ; and all accredited to this paragon of a brother. Even the next morning, as she and Sidney were on their way to Crowhurst, she occasionally reverted to this wonderful voyage, entertaining him with sharp and shrewd little character-sketches of her shipmates. But as they drew near to the end of their journey, she grew more grave. It was a delicate mission on which she was bent ; and she knew not what reception might be accorded her.

Jane met them at the door.

“I am so glad you are come, sir,” she said, anxiously. “I can’t do anything with Miss Anne——”

“Where is she?”

“Upstairs, sir, in her own room. But she has not undressed. She is lying on the bed—and all the night through moaning—I went to her two or three times—but it was no use—and she won’t take anything——”

“Constance, will you go to her at once?” he said.

“By myself?”

“Yes. She knows you are coming. And you will find her easy to get on with: she is sensitive to kindness.”

She went away upstairs, accompanied by the little maid: he turned into the adjacent drawing-room. And there he remained for some twenty minutes, perhaps thirty: to him it seemed hours. Then Constance Weguelin came downstairs again.

“I have persuaded her to go to bed,”

she said. "That is the best place for her. She is a little feverish—no wonder, for she is completely exhausted with her long fasting and her lying awake all night. And she has promised to take something: I hope after that she may fall into a sound sleep. But she will hardly speak of herself. All her anxiety is that you and I should be properly looked after—I mean about food things!—weak and helpless as she is, she sent for Jane twice, to give her further and further directions: isn't that strange?"

"No," said Sidney, without explanation. "I understand."

But the slight feverishness did not yield to these remedial and precautionary measures: the girl could not swallow anything—confessed to a racking headache—had fits of shivering, followed by flushes of heat—while her languor and weakness seemed to increase as the hours went by. Early in the afternoon Constance came down again.

“There’s nothing to be alarmed about, Sidney,” she said; “but I think you ought to send for a doctor.”

He himself drove in to Henley, and brought the doctor out with him. The result of the first examination did not sound so very serious.

“A little feverish, yes. And the temperature rather high, and the pulse, too. A sound night’s rest would do her a world of good. But I will come out again in the evening.”

In the evening he looked somewhat more concerned. The temperature had distinctly risen; the alternate fits of shivering and flushes of heat were more pronounced; and her eyes, when she opened them in answer to some whispered question, had at times a curiously furtive and restless look in them. But mostly she tried to hide away from the light—moaning slightly, perhaps from the pain of the headache, perhaps from mere exhaustion; and now she had quite

forgotten her anxieties as house-mistress—Jane was no longer summoned to attend to the visitors.

Constance remained up all that night, in the sick-room. Sidney, also, had no thought of sleep: he wandered about—sometimes outside, with noiseless footfall. And where was ‘Nan’s bull-dog’ now, he might have asked. But this was an insidious enemy that had slipped by and attacked her, and was like to gain complete possession of her. For with the new day there could be no longer any doubt: she had become the prey of a violent fever, induced by a distraught mind; and the enfeebled frame given over to this consuming fire seemed to grow weaker and weaker, as time went on, until a nameless dread had crept into the atmosphere of this house, and brave assurances were given the one to the other with a sinking heart.

She spoke to no one, and could scarcely

be brought to answer a question. Sometimes, however, she would mutter to herself, in low and panting accents; and when they tried to listen, they found that this troubled self-communion was about inconsequent things; she was delirious—though not vehemently so. But one night—as the fever was drawing near to its crisis—her eyes seemed unusually restless and also unnaturally bright; and although her breath came and went with difficulty, they could make out something of her incoherent talk.

“Dodo,” she was saying in that hurried, panting way—and she did not appear to know who were in the room with her—“Dodo—you struck too hard!—you struck too hard! If I—had been as strong as you—I would have been more merciful to you—I would have hidden a little—I would not have told you that I was so tired of Crowhurst. And—and I know there were many faults—I was not doing very well—

but you cannot always get what you want—in Henley. And I was glad you went to the Café de Provence—I was not jealous—and if you had told me more about what you liked, I would—have tried to do a little better. But perhaps you did not mean it all, Dodo!—perhaps you did not quite mean it all!—perhaps it was to keep me—from following you—or asking you to come back. And I will obey you. You shall not have to complain of me again—there was plenty—to complain of before—only, we were all so happy—Sidney and you and I—and I forgot—and then you grew tired. But there will be no more complaint—I will try to do better—yes, yes, to do better—and Dodo will not grow tired—I will go up to the Café—and—and ask them to show me——” Of a sudden she made an effort to raise herself, and her eyes were wild. “Dodo,” she cried, pitifully, “come back to me!—come back to Nan! Don’t you

know me? I am Nan! I am Nan—that you used to come to see at the Vicarage—don't you remember—the Bristol days? Dodo—it's Nan that's calling you!——”

But here was Constance, with her gentle persuasion, her soothing words, and cool fingers for the burning and aching forehead; and in a space of time all was still again in the room.

It was on this same night that a great steamer was thundering on its course through the moonlit waters of the Mediterranean. There was quite a gay scene on board; for the quarter-deck had been cleared, coloured lamps hung about, a piano brought from the saloon, while ladies and gentlemen—Dick Erridge conspicuously active amongst them—were taking their places for the Lancers. But there was one man who was not of that throng. He remained right away aft; his looks directed to the seething line in wake of the ship,

that was the intangible and fanciful connection between himself and certain far-off and ever-receding shores.

“Are they looking after you, Nan,” he was saying to himself, “—looking well after you, and taking care of you? They’ll have to do that now. And no doubt they will—no doubt they will; for you’re a clever kind of creature at making friends; they’ll come round you, and pet you, and make much of you; and all will go well and happily. And in time you’ll forget all about that letter; and if you should ever look back and think about the early days at Crowhurst—Ah, but you’d better not look back. You must look forward. Your life must all be with your young husband now.”

There was a sudden noise behind him. He turned, with his grave and sad eyes, to see what was going on. The Lancers had begun.

CHAPTER VI.

AVILION.

BENEFICENT sleep, a sound constitution, and assiduous nursing pulled her through; she came back from those dim and drear ways to the white wonder of the living world; and now through their joyfuller forecasts there ran mysterious references to some place called Avilion.

“Avilion?” repeated Nan, as she lay half-dreaming and half-looking out upon the coloured splendours of the garden. “What do you mean, Constance?”

“That is Stephen’s fanciful name for it,” was the answer. “In reality it is a small house in a terrace fronting the sea at

Worthing. Yet what do you think of that as a present, my dear? A ten-roomed house, completely furnished in a plain and simple way—and that was what an excellent old lady handed over to me some eight or nine years ago—in a freak of quite ridiculous generosity. But a most useful gift it has proved ever since,” Constance continued, in cheerful and gentle tones soothing to an invalid’s ear; “for, you see, Stephen and I have to consider ways and means; *we* don’t belong to the folk who can scorn journalism and go and live among the ancient Greeks; and so, to pay the rates and taxes, and the wages of the housekeeper and maid, we let No. 14, Cranberry Terrace, for three months in the summer; and the rest of the year we turn it into a kind of convalescent home if any of our friends want to run down for a pulling together; or Stephen and I may take a few days now and again, if he has been working too hard. Hence, Avilion. We

send people there to cure them of their grievous wounds ; and we are going to take you there as soon as you can be removed : No. 14 will be empty in a week's time now. Unfortunately Stephen won't be able to come down much ; his busiest time is just beginning ; that is, when the other writers are away for their holidays, and the paper is rather short-handed, then he gets more to do than he knows how to deal with—leaders, articles, reviews—it is a fine time for him—so that he never goes away for an autumn holiday ; but at least he could run down by the last train on Friday night and go up again on the Sunday afternoon. If it were only the real Avilion we were taking you to—‘where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow’—but as it is, dear Nan, you must simply put up with Worth-ing, and your chances.”

“How can I thank you for all your goodness to me !” the girl murmured.

“Oh, by the way,” Constance interposed,

“there is one thing we have forgotten. We have left Sidney out! What is to become of Sidney? The programme is all very fine; and I shouldn’t be surprised if you rather liked No. 14—it’s quite a cheerful little place; but at the same time don’t you think it would be rather shabby to leave Sidney out? Don’t you think, just for old sake’s sake, he ought to be included? And my idea is that he should bring his books down, and take rooms at a hotel—I know an exceedingly quiet one in West Worthing; and then on wet days he would have some resource; and on fine days he would go driving with us—Bramber, and Steyning, and Arundel——” There was a sound outside. “What’s that?—the phaeton? Oh, then he’ll be here directly; and you just ask him, Nan, what he has to say to this proposal. I think the quartet of us might have some happy evenings down there—in Avilion.” And therewith she slipped away from the room; for she

heard his footstep on the stair; and she wished to leave the two lovers alone for a while.

When Sidney came in, he was untying a small package.

“I wonder if this is what you want, Nan,” he said. “It is rather difficult getting a pocket-atlas that is minute; but at least this one has the Australian colonies on different maps——”

He turned to the proper pages, and handed her the open book; and for a space she seemed totally oblivious of his presence, so curiously did her eyes dwell on these indented coast-lines, with their closely-printed names of bays and capes and towns. It was a volume that an invalid could hold easily; perhaps she wanted it for moments of loneliness—for musing—for the imaginative study of a wanderer’s whereabouts and his doings. Yet these great continents—Queensland—New South Wales—Victoria—seemed altogether voiceless and remote;

and wide indeed were the waters that closed them round.

“You are not thinking, Nan,” said he, timidly, “of going away out there, when you are quite strong again?”

She summoned herself back.

“Oh, no—oh, no,” she said, in a hopeless kind of way. “He has forbidden it—even if there was a chance of my finding him. And when I know what he wants, I can but obey. What went wrong here at Crowhurst, was all through my not knowing. If I had suspected he was growing tired of me, and of the life here——”

“He never was tired of you!” Sidney broke in, bluntly. “Don’t you believe that. It is not believable. If he were to say so in twenty letters, I would not believe it. No doubt he had his own reasons for going away—and when in course of time he comes back——”

“He will not come back—he will never come back!” she said piteously. “Do

you think he would have flung me away as one useless and disgraced if he had meant ever to come back?" She lay silent for a second or two. "Sidney, when you next go up to town, I wish you would call on Mr. Morris, and ask him what sum it was that my father took away with him."

"Nan," he exclaimed, "I could not do that! Lawyers don't talk about such things to third persons. I could not ask him such a question unless he knew it was with your authority——"

Then 'rosy-red grew she,' through all the pallor left by her recent illness.

"But surely he understands——"

"Yes, I dare say he understands that in the good time coming I shall have to take over the control of all your affairs——"

"And why not now, Sidney—why not now?" she pleaded. "I will give you all the authority, if Mr. Morris will tell me what steps to take. And you must settle

whether Crowhurst is to be sold or not ; my father did not say which way he wished ; I have nothing to guide me. Only, if he were ever to come back to England, he would not seek to return here ; and I am anxious to get away from it—well, of course—I cannot bear to remain in the place where I—where I—disappointed—Dodo. I keep wondering and guessing where I failed—I keep recalling things—and reproaching myself for having driven him from his home : Sidney—Sidney—you must take me away from Crowhurst !—I will go with you anywhere—to Worthing, as Constance says—anywhere—but here everything I see around me is an accusation—and from morning till night I know that I am—that I am disgraced——”

She was weak, and sensitive through weakness ; she turned aside her head, and put her arm across her face, and sobbed. He sought to quiet and soothe her ; and then, by way of distraction, he asked her

what she meant about the sum of money her father had taken with him.

“Because,” said she, with considerable effort, “because—if it was not a large sum—then Dodo might have to come back. Only he was so sparing about anything for himself. All his extravagance was for me. And then—then there’s another thing I have been thinking of: if his money were to run short—and he was determined never to come back to England—yet leaving me here with everything——” Of a sudden she regarded him with anxious solicitude, and she spoke with unwonted energy: “Sidney, you must have Mr. Morris come down here at once. You shall have all the authority that is necessary. And you must sell Crowhurst; and you must advertise for my father in the Australian papers, and tell him that a sum of money is awaiting him—surely that is a small favour to ask of him—he could not refuse me that—he may have been angry and disappointed with me

—and concealing how much he was so— but at least he could not refuse me so much as a favour——” And then she sank back languidly on the pillow again. “No. It is hopeless. I forgot. I must obey. There is to be no inquiry—no advertising: Dodo is gone away from me, just as if he were dead.”

“Don’t be too sure, Nan,” her lover would keep repeating to her. “Strange things happen. And the first thing for you is to get strong and well: that is what your father would say to you if he were here.”

Then in due course came the longed-for transference to No. 14; and quite a light-hearted little party those young people formed as the train sped away down through Surrey and Sussex. The morning was wild and gusty; but there were occasional bursts of sunlight as well; through the streaming window-panes they could see the wide landscape shimmering in gold from time to time. But it was with themselves they were mostly

concerned; there were all kinds of eager and happy plans and forecasts; literary projects, too, some of them not of the sanest. Stephen Weguelin insisted that his first duty to the spirit of the age, his sacred duty, would be to write an article protesting against the monstrous injustice of withholding the franchise from the inmates of lunatic asylums. Constance, on the other hand, had in mind a paper for some woman's magazine—a paper which she declared would capture the hearts of all mothers everywhere. She had heard of some juvenile romancist, aged nine or so, who had been giving an account of how she had taken her doll to be photographed; how Dolly had fallen asleep in the cab and woke up cross; how she had yawned, and objected to having her dress tidied; how she had looked frightened when they put her in the chair; how the photographer had complimented her on being the very steadiest sitter he ever had; how, when

Dolly was asked to assume a pleasant expression, she had smiled so sweetly——

“What a disgraceful little liar!” Sidney broke in.

“Not at all!” said Constance, indignantly. “Simply imagination. And when you get heaps of it, as in Milton, then you call it genius. It is bulk that impresses people. The small thief who picks your pocket is a wretched creature; but the big thieves, the Drakes and Clives, are splendid fellows and heroes. I don’t call it lying; I call it imagination; and every child has its share. And I think I see my way to making £2 10s. or £3 out of this particular little monkey, if only all of you would help me with suggestions—we’ll talk about it after dinner to-night.”

And so they got Nan established in these new quarters, surrounding her with every attention, and kindness, and care; and Sidney took possession of his rooms at the hotel, bringing down from Henley such books as

he wanted; and very soon these four—Stephen from Friday to Sunday only—had fallen into a settled and simple and contented sort of life, with plenty of occupation and mutual interest. It is true that sometimes Nan would sink into profound and silent reverie, and hold herself aloof from the common talk; and she was fond of reading Australian papers—staring blankly at such names as Adelaide, and Melbourne, and Brisbane; and occasionally, when she began to get about a little, driving, a startled look would come to her face at sight of some distant figure—a look to be dissipated on nearer approach. But she was bound to show herself as cheerful as might be, if only out of gratitude for all this kindness that was being showered upon her; and the sensation of returning health and spirits was a wonderful and exhilarating thing; and she was young—and her lover was with her, demanding assurances of her happiness.

“Another,” said Constance, with smiling and approving eyes, “another whom Avilion has restored. I wish I had begun by keeping a book.”

Now and again, of course, Sidney had to run up to town, sometimes to see about Nan’s affairs, sometimes to consult his publisher about the wood-cuts for the Dionysiac volume, which was now nearly ready. And on one of these occasions, when he was returning in the afternoon across St. James’s Park, he encountered Lady Helen: she was driving in an open barouche, apparently making for Constitution Hill, and she was alone. Well, he bided his time; it was for her to say whether she would recognise him at all or not; and she had proved herself a young person of capricious moods. But now, instead of treating him with explicit coldness, she stopped the carriage—and waited for him to approach.

“You are not at Henley, then?” she

said, in some surprise. "Your mother went down this morning, to see if anything had happened——"

"I haven't been at Henley for ever so long," he said. "I wrote to her from Worthing——"

"Yes; a hotel-address: of course she imagined you had run down there on a mere temporary visit," Lady Helen answered him; and then she hesitated for a second. "Where were you going just now?" she asked of a sudden.

"Victoria Station," he told her.

"Will you drive home with me? I shall not keep you two moments. I have something to say to you."

It was exceedingly annoying, for he was on his way to catch the Brighton express; but he was a good-natured lad; and in other days Lady Helen had been able to 'command him anything.' He got into the carriage, and in a few minutes was driven to Upper Brook Street.

When they entered the house, she did not precede him upstairs to the drawing-room; she asked him to step into the dining-room; and there she left him, saying she would return in a moment. He wondered what was going to happen now. He hoped something amiable. He had no wish to quarrel with anybody. But he had a dim impression that his mother had endeavoured to complicate matters as between Lady Helen and himself; and he knew that the younger woman had a resolute temper. Above all, he did not wish to be bothered; he had some proofs of woodcuts with him, that he was anxious to show to Nan, and to Constance, and to Stephen—who was coming down by a later train. Why should he be stopped and hindered; and what interest had he in Upper Brook Street?

When Lady Helen returned her usual gracious equanimity appeared to have deserted her; she seemed disturbed; and

the fingers of one hand, that were clasped over some small object, were distinctly tremulous—whether this was involuntary or intentional it was not for him to say. He was standing by the window: she went up to him.

“Sidney,” she said, with shyly downcast eyes, and there was quite a pretty tenderness in her tone, “I am afraid we have not quite understood each other. I am afraid there has been misapprehension—fancies and dreams, perhaps—impracticable in this common work-a-day world. But at least we can part friends——”

“Oh, yes, certainly!” he responded, much relieved: perhaps even now, with a smart hansom, he could catch the express?

“I mean,” she went on, with an attractive embarrassment, “in view—of the settlement of my life—that I am looking forward to. Not even your mother knows as yet—but of course you must know—who else but you? And if it is not quite

definitely arranged—if, at the very last moment, one were to break off—but no, of course that is not to be thought of: the days for that kind of thing are long past. Only—you see—with this before me in the future—I thought I ought to give you back what you gave me in other circumstances: you remember: I *did* promise to wear it for ever and ever—but it's the way of the world that things turn out differently—— ”

And timidly she held out the little Roman charm—the small gold bell mounted as a brooch.

“ Oh, but it was not so important as all that ! ” he protested. “ Won't you keep it ? —a mere trifle—I thought you took a fancy to it—— ”

“ I cannot,” she said, sadly. “ It would only awaken memories. And you must give me back the ring I gave you—— ”

“ I can send it to you,” he said. “ It is at Henley.”

“ Then this is good-bye ! ” She extended

her hand to him, and it seemed to be trembling a little ; and her eyes, that were now upturned to his, were quite affectionate and regretful. "How strangely things turn out !" she said—still holding his hand, and regarding him. "It is not what one wishes ; it is what fate drives one to. At least I suppose so. We don't seem to have the power to shape things as we would have them. We can but submit. And as I say, Sidney, you and I can part friends."

"Oh, yes, certainly," he repeated—with a vague consciousness that it was high time for him to get away. And get away he did—though he missed the Brighton express, and in consequence received a severe scolding from Nan.

Not twenty minutes after he had gone Mrs. Hume drove up in a hansom ; and Lady Helen—already quite quit of any pretty agitation—followed her friend to her room, to hear of the abortive visit to Henley.

“I wanted to ask you about another thing,” Lady Helen said, comfortably seating herself. “Do you know how these announcements are sent to the papers?”

She handed a slip to Mrs. Hume—and now her fingers were not in the least tremulous; while she looked on with apparent indifference. Then, on this slip, Mrs. Hume read these clearly-pencilled words: ‘A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between the Hon. Montague Francis Howe, son of Lord Grenfell of Garstang, and the Lady Helen Yorke, only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Monks-Hatton.’

“Helen, what is this!” she exclaimed, in affright.

“I suppose it ought to go to the papers,” Lady Helen answered calmly. “Are they advertisements, do you know? Are they sent through one’s bookseller? But perhaps I’d better leave Monty to see about such things—as soon as I give him permission.”

“Mr. Howe?” her friend cried, still wholly aghast. “And about Captain Erle?”

“A man about town knows too much,” the younger lady rejoined, with a touch of contempt.

“And Sidney!”

But at this Lady Helen became almost serious.

“My dear Mrs. Hume!” she said. “Really—really—have you not got that extraordinary delusion out of your head yet? Why, the very last thing in the world that ever could have happened! Sidney and I are very good friends—of course—and I hope we shall always remain so; but as for anything else—the idea was never to be thought of for a moment!” And Mrs. Hume sat staring at the slip of paper, that told her of the final ruin of her dearly cherished hopes.

She was soon to hear of another projected marriage, for Sidney had at length persuaded

Nan to give herself over into his charge. She was at first reluctant and afraid; it seemed incredible to her that this wedding should take place, and her father be absent: was the bride to have no one to stand by her at such a moment? But she was alone and helpless; she could no longer encroach on the kindness of these good friends; and her father had plainly told her what he expected of her. Then Sidney pointed out that as their conjoint small fortunes would afford what would be for them an ample competence, they were at liberty to choose their place of abode where they pleased; and he asked her (dreading the effect on her of any further inland experiments) what she thought of this same Worthing? It was quiet. It was cheerful and healthy. It was convenient for running up to town. And then she would have more or less of the society of Constance and Stephen, who on their side had become quite charmed with this companionship. Nan, shy, grate-

ful, affectionate, agreed to everything he suggested; and then he took her away on rambling and imaginative house-hunting perambulations, which proved to be almost an idyllic occupation, in these golden autumn days.

Naturally he announced his intentions to his mother; and she, finding her own schemes all gone to wreck and ruin, resolved as a last wild resource to appeal to the family at large. What she had failed to do, with all her tact and cunning and audacity, perhaps their combined authority might do; if peradventure there was still a chance of saving him. And thus it was that on a certain afternoon three veritable sons of Anak arrived in Worthing; and no doubt they appeared as demi-gods to the nurse-maids wheeling perambulators along the esplanade. For these were a deputation: these were three of the 'handsome Humes'—with no other than the Squire of Ellerdale at their head. Sidney, whom they

found in his rooms, was at first inclined to be angry at this interference and impertinence, as he considered it; but there was a ludicrous side; the ineptitude of the whole proceeding seemed farcical.

“Then I am to understand that nothing will move you?” the eldest brother said, sternly—for he did not like being treated with scorn. “You are absolutely determined to marry this girl—you are absolutely determined to bring a prize-fighter into the family——”

“You need not be alarmed,” said Sidney. “The prize-fighter—who is not a prize-fighter—will never come near you. He is away at the other end of the world, and will remain there. Why he went there—why he insists on remaining there—well, sometimes I have suspicions; and if he has done this partly or mainly that his daughter should not suffer through any prejudice against himself, if he has done it merely that things should go easily for her, then I say he has made a

sacrifice for her that I don't believe one of you would make for any one belonging to you, wife, mother, or child. But that is not the question. What I want to point out is that I don't propose to bring any one into the family, either father or daughter. My wife and I will most likely live here in Worthing; but we don't ask any of you to come here, any more than we ask to be allowed to go to you. There is no need for any quarrel. The world is wide enough for all of us."

And indeed they eventually found they had come on a fool's errand, and were glad to have done with it; sulkily or amicably, as their dispositions tended, they parted with him; and left the hotel.

But on their way to the station an odd incident occurred. They were walking along the esplanade when they came in sight of two ladies, the younger and taller of whom was of such a singular and remarkable beauty as to draw all eyes to her. It

was but a passing glimpse they had of her; manners forbade more; but all of them seemed equally struck; and instinctively—when they had allowed those two to go some little distance—they turned, under pretence of looking along the beach.

“I’ll bet you ten thousand pounds that is the girl!—I know it!—I am certain of it!” said the youngest of the three, vehemently.

“What a marvellous creature!—and look how she walks!” exclaimed the second, gazing after her.

But the eldest one, the grave one, spoke most to the point.

“I don’t know,” said he, slowly. “Must have been something exceptional to have turned Sidney into a pig-headed brute. . . . Well, if that is the girl, I think I should almost be inclined to ask her to Ellerdale for Christmas—Sidney and her. . . . But I suppose the women wouldn’t stand it.”

And then the three giants strode onwards

again towards the station. And Nan and Constance Weguelin also continued on their way, unaware that they had attracted any notice.

CHAPTER VII.

SPIES.

EVENTUALLY they fixed upon a house some little distance back from the sea-front, in the remoter part of West Worthing, the inducements being that there Nan would find herself mistress of a considerable garden, while Sidney, for working purposes, wanted one or two quiet rooms not overlooking any thoroughfare. Then began the process of nest-building ; but here Nan showed the strangest diffidence ; she seemed to say—‘ Don’t you know that I was a failure at Crowhurst ?—of what value can my advice be to you now ? ’ And indeed, as the wedding-day drew near, it was not of the planning out of a library or the

hanging up of portières that she was mainly thinking. She had become possessed by the conviction that if through any possibility her father were still in England, or had returned to England, he would not be very far away from the church-door when his daughter passed in. It was an unreasoning belief, perhaps; but she brooded over it; in visionary moments she imagined she could see a dusky figure in one of the pews, regarding the ceremony, with all unkindness and discontent and reproach quite gone from his eyes. And of these things she made confession to Constance Weguelin.

“But, my dear Nan,” Constance said, “you have never doubted for a moment that your father did go away to Australia, and that he was resolved not to come back to England.”

“Yes, I know,” the girl made answer, in an absent kind of way. “That was what I believed. And perhaps it is so—perhaps—

perhaps he is now in Australia—and not thinking of me, or of any one in this country. It may be so. But still—still—something seems to tell me that he will not be so very far away when we go into the church. It is a kind of dream; but sometimes dreams come true. And then that would make it all so different, Constance. You see, I have obeyed him, literally, up till now. I did not seek to go after him, to beg him to come back and give me another trial at Crowhurst. I did not advertise—or bother him. I obeyed him, as he wished. But this would be quite different. This would be his own doing. And if, when we came out of the church, I were to see him standing by—hanging back, rather—for that was always his way—I hope Sidney would not be vexed if I left him for a moment, and went over, and said, ‘ Surely you have come home for good now, Dodo ! ’ ” Then she added, in a lower voice : “ And sometimes—sometimes,

Constance—I am convinced it is going to happen.”

Sidney, when he heard of these mysterious fancies, merely said—

“ Well, it’s a pity we are not fashionable folk, Nan; for then the marriage would be announced in the papers beforehand—and that would give public notice; and if there is any chance of your father being in this country—— ”

“ If he is, he will know,” she said, with superstitious certainty. “ I have little fear about that. He always knew what was happening to me. But then, Sidney, if he were in the church, or outside the church, I may be so nervous as not to look out properly—perhaps you would—— ”

“ Trust me for that, Nan,” said he, cheerfully. “ And if I set eyes on him anywhere, all the fixed and legitimate etiquette of the occasion must simply go to the wall: my first care will be to get

hold of your father, and bring him home with us to the breakfast."

It was the quietest of weddings. There were perhaps about a dozen strangers—mostly old women—in the pews; and when Sidney, accompanied by his friend Stephen Weguelin, arrived, the briefest glance enabled him to make sure that Mr. Summers was not in this small building. Then again, when the ceremony was over, and the bridegroom brought forth his young bride into the clear sunlight of the outer world, there were some children to scatter flowers in her path (this was Constance's doing: she had heard of an incident outside St. Mary's Church, Henley), but in vain did he look beyond them, quickly scanning one or two groups of half-interested bystanders. Nan was all trembling when she got into the carriage.

"No sign of him?" she managed to say. He shook his head.

"Then it is my last chance," she

murmured. "He will never come back now."

And yet it was little more than a year after these occurrences that Dick Erridge, in his chambers close by Regent Circus, was clearly expecting a visitor. The supper-table was laid for two; he himself (in a sumptuous smoking-jacket) had seen to the careful adjustment of the lamps, profanely made out of old silver candlesticks; and he had roused a roaring fire in the grate, though the winter was not yet come. And then he looked around, not without some satisfaction. There was now an air of travel about these rooms that formerly they did not possess. A trophy of savage weapons was placed over the chimney-piece—spears, clubs, boomerangs, and shields, surmounted by the hind paws of a kangaroo; large prints of Australian race-courses hung on the walls; on the couches were thrown specimens of Indian and Burmese em-

broidery, purchased from the wily Hindoo of Malta. For the rest, the proper wines had been decanted; the champagne put temporarily in ice; and on the top of one of the folded table-napkins was a card, bearing the simple legend 'Welcome to England!'

Dick kept pacing to and fro—looking from the windows—listening at the top of the landing—going back to wake up the fire, or give a final touch to the pink shades of the lamps. And at last the longed-for sound was heard. He dashed down the stairs—opened the door—and was out on the pavement.

"Here you are at last!" he cried, in joyful tones—and he assisted the new comer to alight as if he had been an invalid. "Why, I couldn't believe my eyes when I got your wire from Gib.—But where's your luggage?"

"I left it at Paddington——"

"Well, well, never mind," the eager

host said. "Come along! We'll see about arrangements afterwards. You and I are going to have a little bit of supper—for I know what that dismal jog-jog up from Plymouth is—and then I'll give you all the news——"

He preceded his guest up the stair, threw open the door, and awaited his entrance. Mr. Summers stepped into the room, looking around him as if there was something unfamiliar in this place: in his own appearance there was but little alteration—perhaps his eyes were a trifle more worn and sad.

"Dick," he said, as he sank into the easy-chair that his friend had drawn forward for him, "I'm a sneak—and that's the fact."

"Oh, yes, certainly!" responded the other, with magnanimous scorn. "I quite agree. Precisely so. And it would please me down to the ground to see any noble sportsman go up and say as much to you:

in the next minute he'd be under the impression that the whole everlasting Tower of Babel had sprung into the air and come down on him again—— ”

“All the way home from Australia,” Mr. Summers went on, as he stared blankly into the fire, “there was plenty of time for thinking; and the fact is, Dick, I grew to believe that there must be something within us that's a deal stronger than ourselves, something that can drive us to do what we don't want to do. I did not want to be here this night: indeed I did not. I had made up my mind I should never see England again; and was all the more reconciled to it when I heard that everything was going on well with Nan. And then, Dick—then, you see, Dick—when I got this last announcement from you—the clipping from the paper—something seemed to come over me. The fancy of Nan being a young mother—the wondering whether I could not get a far-off glimpse of her, even a

mile away—a glimpse of her pride and her happiness—yes, indeed, a mile away—I wouldn't ask to go nearer than that: well, I could not resist. There was something stronger than me that got a grip of me. It was no use. I was ashamed of myself—I tried to hold back—and then—then of a sudden I took a passage in the first steamer that was sailing—and here I am."

He looked up, almost sternly.

"But mind you, Dick," said he, "I trust to your word of honour that you gave me before. My coming back now, just for a glimpse of Nan in her new station, is not to be allowed to lead to the undoing of what has been done—I would rather go right back to Plymouth to-morrow, and take the next steamer out. My going away has worked well; and it cost a little, I can tell you—I suppose Nan didn't like being left like that. But everything is going on first-rate now; and if I am to have a look at her as the young mother, it must be with caution—it

must be managed with tremendous caution, Dick——”

“Oh, there’s no trouble about that,” the younger man said, airily. “I saw her yesterday.”

“You saw Nan yesterday?” Summers exclaimed, with a violent start. He appeared to be quite bewildered. “Yesterday? And where was she? And what was she like? How was she looking?”

“What was she looking like?” Erridge repeated. “Well, I should say that wild-roses in June were a fool to her; that’s all I can think of, for I’m an unpoetical person, thank God. As it happened, the day was particularly bright and clear, and you should have seen her complexion, and her light-brown hair; and she was laughing and talking, and that always suited her, you know; the little nursemaid was pushing the perambulator, and Miss Anne—or Mrs. Sidney Hume, rather, to give her all her dignity—was walking by the side of it, and

chatting and laughing to the occupant of that important vehicle. I don't suppose the kid understood a blessed word; but the smiling young mother was quite a picture, don't you know—you should have seen the women-folk turn to look at her—it was something they had to gaze at, I assure you. I felt quite proud of her myself; I would have given twenty pounds to be able to go up and remind her of my ignominious existence; but that might have got me into trouble—awkward questions——”

Mr. Summers interrupted him.

“Dick, man, tell me!” he said, with an almost piteous solicitude. “Do you—think I could get—a sight of Nan—looking like that?”

“Why not? Why not?” Dick rejoined. “But here is something more immediate and practical. I'll tell you afterwards all about what we're going to do: in the meantime you take this chair. The things

are just coming up. Help yourself to an appetiser—try one of those sardines with a touch of cayenne, and a few threads of anchovy; and this is Marcobrunner of '70—'70, mind you—and in capital condition. Yes, here's the soup. Nothing much to follow: a grilled sole, a cutlet, a steak-and-oyster pudding, and a bird to wind up with. But I thought we'd better have our chat here, old man, instead of at some public place——”

“Yes, yes; yes, yes,” said his companion, who cared little for this food or drink compared with the prospect of his hearing more, and still more, about Nan. “You're an awful good chap, Dick, to have taken all this trouble—I mean about going down to Worthing——”

“I've been down there the whole of the last three days!” cried Dick, as he ladled out the fragrant, pellucid, steaming soup. “For this is how I am situated, just at present. Here's my old grandfather insist-

ing on my going away down to him the day after to-morrow ; and goodness knows when he'll let me come back. Got it into his ancient noddle that my brilliant conversation is a cure for lumbago ; perhaps it is ; I don't know ; I don't see him get any suppler ; he rises from his chair with his back bent as if he wanted to play on an invisible violoncello. However, that leaves me to-morrow to go down with you to Worthing ; and of course I wanted to see how the land lay up to the last moment. Oh, I tell you I'd make a first-rate private detective--when I give up curing lumbago. Since I came back from Australia, I've learnt all the little ways of that household. She generally goes out in the morning, about eleven or half-past, with the peram. and the dot of a housemaid ; the husband remains at home, no doubt at his literary labours--by Jove, what did I do with that notice of his book--I clipped it out of the *Times* to send you--two columns--

fancy! — they wouldn't give as much importance to a new burlesque at the Gaiety! ———”

“But about Nan, Dick—about Nan,” said the other.

“Well, sometimes she does a bit of shopping; and then sometimes she goes out to the end of the pier, and sits in a sheltered place there, smiling and nodding to that little idiot that doesn't understand a word she says; and sometimes a lady-friend of hers comes out and sits and chats with her. Then it's back home towards one—luncheon, I presume; and then again in the afternoon her husband and she go driving—and she takes the reins——”

“Doesn't she sit well, Dick?—hasn't she style?” her father interpolated, eagerly.

“Then they appear to have one or two friends down there; and sometimes they dine with them; and sometimes the friends come round.—But here, what the devil are

we doing!" Dick cried abruptly. "We have forgotten to drink his health!"

"Whose health?"

"Why, the lord and master—the son and heir—the important person in the household. Fill your glass, old man—that's Pol Roger of '84, and as good as they make it; and I can give you his name, too; for I thought I might as well look in at the registrar's, just to let you have all the details right and proper. So here's to the young gentleman, by the style and title of James Sidney Hume—and long life to him!"

But Nan's father did not raise his glass: he seemed stupefied. Dick drained his with a will. Then he chanced to look over.

"What's up now? Not drink his health? That's high treason——"

"Oh, yes,—his health—I beg your pardon," said the other, quite humbly. And then he added, with a timid glance: "But

—but what did you say, Dick—what did you say was the name of the boy?——”

“Why, James Sidney Hume—and a very pretty compliment to you, I take it!”

“No, no!” Mr. Summers said, hastily—and he appeared to be much perturbed. “They could not mean that. They couldn’t have been thinking of me—Nan couldn’t have been thinking of me—after the way I left her at Crowhurst. It’s a common name, man—it would naturally occur to them—just as Tom or Harry might—they couldn’t have been thinking of me at all. You must be mistaken, Dick; you’re sometimes mistaken, you know; you’re too positive about things——”

“Well, I’m positive about this thing anyway,” said Dick, boldly, “that as far as that young chap is called James he is called after you: take it as you like, but there’s the fact.”

For several seconds the elder of the two men was silent and plunged in profound

reverie. Then he said, slowly, and almost as if to himself—

“She’s a strange girl, is Nan. Perhaps she may not be thinking so hardly of me after all.”

They went down by an early train next morning; but they did not go on to West Worthing station, for fear of being recognised; they stopped at Worthing proper; and first of all, and with great circumspection, they proceeded to hunt out lodgings in a secluded part of the town. Then came the question as to how long these humble apartments might be wanted. Mr. Summers glanced guiltily towards his companion.

“I will take them by the week, Dick,” he said. “You see, I am uncertain when I may sail; and I should not like to go back without having an evening or two with you, for the sake of old times——”

“And surely to goodness the lumbago treatment can’t last more than a fortnight!”

Erridge said. "Well, yes, better take the rooms by the week. Right you are. You can arrange about meals afterwards."

Dick was quite jaunty; he was going about with his great friend and hero; and that was enough for him. But Mr. Summers was most pitiably anxious, and even agitated, as they now set out for West Worthing; he kept gazing far ahead, and glancing nervously down each successive thoroughfare, though Dick had assured him there was not the slightest chance of their encountering Nan in this quarter of the town.

"It's too great a risk—I shouldn't have done it," his companion kept repeating. "I yielded, Dick. I'm playing the coward. Look what it is I put in danger—all the happy state of affairs that was brought about by a good deal of suffering. Yes, a good bit, my lad. I had a bad time the night I left Crowhurst; and a bad time the day you and I sailed away from Ply-

mouth; and Nan, too—I dare say she thought the letter rather cruel—she may have cried a little—you see, I had to make it rough. Rough to get smooth. Rough to get smooth afterward. And now that everything is going right, here am I risking it all—pure selfishness, that’s what it is, Dick——”

He grasped his friend’s arm. They had come to the top of a street, at the far end of which the sea and the sea-front were visible.

“That’s the way she passes along?” he asked, hurriedly. “But I am not going down there yet. No, no, I must lay plans. I must see everything clear——”

“It is after one,” Erridge said to him. “They will be in-doors by now, and we can go and have a look at their house with comparative safety——”

“My good fellow, there must be no comparative, it must be absolute safety!” Summers insisted. “I will not go any-

where near, unless I am positively certain we shall not be seen——”

“I can manage it—I can manage it,” his friend rejoined: he had acquired a perfect knowledge of the topography of this neighbourhood.

And so they made their way circuitously—keeping well back from the sea-front—until Mr. Summers’s guide signified to him to stop.

“That is the house over yonder,” Dick said, in an unnecessary whisper. “The dining-room window is to the left of the steps; but I don’t suppose they could see us—not even if they came outside.”

It was rather a large house, of irregular construction, set in a garden that was surrounded by a low wall of black-gray flint and red brick. On the southern side a row of young trees separated it from the adjacent garden; and all around, within the flint and brick wall, there was a hedge of some spindrift-resisting shrub. The

gate was of oaken bars ; there were steps leading up to the front door ; and round one portion of the building there was a balcony, on the first story. Altogether it was not a very remarkable-looking place ; but this man gazed at it with the intensest interest—at each one of its windows, indeed, as if perchance some glimmer of a human shape might appear there. But there was no sign of life. A fishmonger's boy teasing a small terrier—which seems to be the natural attitude of a fishmonger's boy—was the only creature they saw in all this voiceless waste of villas and gardens.

“ It's the strangest thing to be so near Nan,” her father said, and he also spoke in an undertone, though it was quite uncalled-for. “ Many a night during the voyage, when I was lying awake, I used to think she seemed millions and millions of miles away, and that it was not possible I should ever come within sight of her again. And she's just over there ! It's

a good big house, Dick. A bigger house than Crowhurst. But she won't have any difficulty: she's the cleverest creature of a manager you ever saw—sharp and prompt—every item of the books to be checked—I can tell you she brought one or two of those Henley tradesmen to their senses. And reasonable with servants; reasonable, but reasonably firm, too; she would have her way—the young wretch!—and then she was always so good-humoured that they couldn't sulk. Oh, she's a clever one, is Nan! And she's looking well, you said? Looking particularly well, didn't you say? I shouldn't wonder, now, if the sea-air was better for her. Why it's the strangest thing—Nan to be over there—perhaps just behind that window—or seated at the table—and everything neat and trim, I'll be bound—everything bright and neat and trim—and bits of flowers—she was such a clever creature with her fingers—just a touch here and there. And to think

of her aspiring to the dignity of a mother! —the cheek of her!—but looking quite young and as pretty as ever, you said? —and light-hearted, too — talking and laughing, you said—I liked to hear that, Dick—I liked to hear that—that was Nan's natural self—I liked to hear about the young mother on the sea-front, smiling and talking so that people were quite taken with the look of her——”

He was rambling on, in a vague maze of wonder and delight, when of a sudden he gripped his companion and tried to slink back a bit, though indeed they were both in a sufficiently sheltered corner. For at this moment there drove up to the front of the house they were scrutinising an open fly, and from it a lady descended, a silver-haired woman of unusual stature and commanding carriage. She passed in by the gate, crossed the garden, went up the steps, and rang the bell.

“Come away, Dick, come away!” said

Summers, anxiously. "She may be calling for them—they may come out again with her—let's get away——"

Well, Dick Erridge was nothing loth; for it was well past two o'clock; and they would have to walk back to Worthing before they could, in security, get some small snack of luncheon somewhere. But as soon as they were at a safe distance from the house, Mr. Summers's jubilation broke all bounds.

"Who was right, then—who was right, Dick?" he said, with a kind of triumphant eagerness—and yet still in an undertone, as if the very walls had ears. "You were always doubtful about the necessity of my leaving England; but now I can show you—now I can prove it! Do you know who that was who drove up to the house?——"

"No, I don't," was the reply. "But she would make a rare good figure in a ballet of Amazons—the Queen of the Amazons—centre of the stage—the Alhambra for

choice—she'd be worth her weight in gold to any management——”

“Man alive, talk sense!” Summers exclaimed, though he was clearly in no quarrelsome mood. “That was Mrs. Hume!—that was Sidney Hume’s mother!—the representative of the whole family—they’ll all follow where she leads—and didn’t I tell you that everything would go well and happily with Nan?——”

“It’s no great thing to have a call from one’s mother-in-law,” Dick said, peevishly.

“There’s some things I can’t drive into your head, Dick, and that’s the fact,” his companion rejoined with impatience. “Do you think that Mrs. Hume, or any of the family, would be going near that house if I had remained in England? I saw well enough how the land lay. And I don’t blame anybody. Why should I blame anybody? People have their prejudices—quite natural. Only, don’t you see, my lad, as soon as I was out of the way, then

came the chance of everything being made right for Nan. And it's working, Dick; it's working; they'll all come round to her—you mark my word; she's such a clever creature; she's got such a trick of taking hold of people—it's her pretty eyes, I think——”

He laughed—a little, short laugh; and he struck the clenched fist of his right hand into the hollow palm of his left.

“Man, man, Dick, I told you! I told you my way was the right way. You were always a doubting kind of a chap. And now will you believe—when you've seen Mrs. Hume herself drive up to the house? And it has all been so successful—it has all gone so well for Nan, as I knew it would—that it makes it all the more necessary I should take every precaution, until I get safely away to Australia again. Oh, you won't find me going too near. I'll watch about. I'll go early, and look around, and keep out of danger, until my

opportunity comes. I'll choose my time ; for after all, Dick—after all—if Nan were to be down on the sea-front—walking along in the way you told me—well, I'd like to be just a *little* nearer—just to see she was the same happy kind of creature she used to be at Crowhurst—I'd like to see her as you described her—laughing and nodding to the little fellow—until the people turned to look at the young mother—because she was so pretty to look at——” He brought himself up short. “ Well, I'm an infernal fool, Dick. I beg your pardon—I won't talk any more. But—but—perhaps you understand, Dick : I shall be such a short time in England ; and—and this glimpse of Nan means a good deal to me.”

Hungry as he was, Dick needed no apology ; it was enough that he had been of some service to his great hero and friend. And then again, when they had sought the seclusion of a backward-lying inn in Worthing, Jim Summers had not

a thought for the meal that his companion ordered in.

“The dusk, Dick,” he said, “the dusk will be my best time for getting near to the house. I can get as near to the house as I like then. Night after night—as long as I remain in England—that will be my safest chance.” He laughed to himself, and rubbed his hands, in nervous anticipation and delight. “And for that time at least, Dick—for that time at least—Nan will have her old bull-dog back again.”

CHAPTER VIII.

CONCLUSION.

THERE was a brisk south-westerly breeze blowing, with flying shreds of cloud; the shallow waters of the Channel, racing and chasing, shivered in silver under swift bursts of sunlight; while thick-seething, opaque, tawny-yellow waves broke and thundered tumultuously up the shelving beach, receding again with a long roar of grinding gravel. It was a fresh, invigorating morning, full of movement and change and anticipation: it was easy to guess that Nan would not remain long in-doors on such a day.

“Over two weeks—nearer three weeks—of what you might call perfect happiness,” Mr.

Summers was saying, in his grave and deliberate fashion, as he and Dick Erridge walked along Worthing pier together. "That's a good lot, Dick. That's a good lot, even if it were spread over a whole lifetime. Many a poor devil has never had a single day. And when I am away back in Melbourne again, there'll be such heaps of things to remember——"

"But look here," said Dick, glancing rather anxiously around, "isn't this rather too open? Isn't this rather conspicuous? If you are so bent on leaving England without having been recognised——"

"I'll show you, Dick; you just wait a minute; I've found the safest corner in the whole town," his companion said, confidently.

So they walked on to the end of the pier, which is mainly occupied by a large building given over in the season to concerts, lectures, and the like; but now, out of the season, it had been dismantled; and when

they entered they found the place practically empty, save for the stacked piles of chairs, while through the open doors the winds of heaven blew freely. Then Mr. Summers showed him a recess just within the front entrance—probably at other times used as a box for the ticket-collector; and adjacent was a window commanding a view of the whole length of the pier.

“Now do you understand, Dick?” he said, eagerly. “I can see her come all the way down; and she passes so close—so close, man, it is as if you were speaking to her—I’ve heard her say things as she went by. Fancy being so near as that—actually listening to Nan’s voice: that is better than watching her about a mile off along the Parade! Now let’s go and see if there are any signs of her.” And hardly had they got outside again when he exclaimed joyfully: “Yes, yes; I thought so; always about this time; yonder she is! And the nursemaid with the perambulator: they’re

almost certainly coming out here. Now mind you, Dick, keep well back—keep well back. Oh, you'll see her clearly enough—you'll find her come quite close by the window."

And then again, after considerable waiting, when Nan and her small charge at length drew near, he became more and more excited. He spoke in undertones, in a sort of trembling ecstasy of delight.

"Don't you think she's prettier than ever, Dick? I'm certain the sea-air suits her! Did you ever see such a freshness of complexion? And how finely she walks!—a free, light step—that's good health and good spirits, you know, as well as a good figure. No wonder the Worthing folk turn round to look at the pretty young mother—I suppose it isn't very good manners, Dick—but I like to see them do it—I like it. The Queen of the place she is!—the Queen of the place!—you should watch a shopman smirk and smile when he crosses the pave-

ment to her phaeton—for she was always so good-natured and friendly with every one—the cleverest creature in making friends!—Now, Dick, not a whisper——”

They came along. The young mother carried in her hand a folded newspaper—probably she had received it from the postman just as they were leaving the house, for the wrapper was not yet taken off—and with this instrument she was engaged in teasing her precious infant, so as to draw his attention towards herself, while she smiled and talked and laughed to him. They passed by so close that Dick, dreading some stray glance, involuntarily fell back; but Nan's father remained looking after her, in a kind of entrancement. The vision passed almost instantly: then there was nothing but this wide, bare concert-room, with its open doors and its stacked chairs.

“Sometimes she goes round, and walks up and down the pier again,” her father said, in an excited undertone, “and some-

times she chooses a sheltered corner to sit in——”

“I’ll find out in a second,” said his companion, moving off to the other open door.

“Cautiously — cautiously, Dick,” Summers said, almost as if he would restrain him—but indeed the younger man showed the utmost circumspection.

And in about a minute he had returned.

“She is reading the newspaper,” said he. “So that if you did want to get away—if you think this is rather a risky place—we might get safely off now.”

“I would rather wait—if you don’t mind, my good chap,” said his friend, whose eyes hungered and thirsted for some further, even the briefest, glimpse of Nan. “We are quite safe. She would never dream of coming into this empty and draughty building. And then, you see, Dick, every additional time that I can have a look at her is something for me to think back on

when I am out yonder. You don't mind, do you? "

" Mind? " said Dick—and it was all he would say.

So they remained in this deserted place ; but their stay was not of long duration ; for a few minutes thereafter they perceived approaching a lady whom both recognised as a friend of Nan's, though neither knew her name.

" Sometimes she comes out and takes Nan away for a little walk in the town—to see the shops, very often. We'd better be ready, Dick——"

The warning was given just in time. These two had hardly returned to the opportune recess by the front entrance when the little cortège outside came into sight ; and as they passed the open door fragments of their talk were distinctly audible.

" Christmas? " Nan was saying. " Well, they've asked us to Ellerdale—the family

gathering, you know—and Sidney has been so kind about it, leaving it to me to decide; but I think I would rather spend a quiet Christmas here, with you and Sidney and Stephen——”

“That is wrong—that is wrong,” said her father, under his breath, when they had got well away. “She should have gone to Ellerdale. But perhaps travelling with the child would be awkward. Well, well, all in good time—all in good time! It’s all going right now!”

He followed her with straining vision, until she was hardly recognisable in the distance, while Dick Erridge stood by in acquiescent silence. But it was reserved for Dick to make a notable discovery, when at length they left the empty concert-room and passed round by the head of the pier. They came to the sheltered part that Nan frequently chose; and here, by accident, Dick perceived a torn piece of paper that the wind had blown into a corner. It

looked like a newspaper-wrapper ; and when, out of idle curiosity, he picked it up, a newspaper-wrapper it was found to be ; and not only that but it had Nan's married name and her Worthing address on it.

"A Melbourne paper?" said he, with some surprise. "That was a Melbourne paper, then, she was reading? And it comes from the office: I suppose she gets it regularly——"

"A Melbourne paper?" her father instantly repeated. "Let me see!"

He took the torn wrapper into his hands, and gazed at it long and thoughtfully. Then he glanced at Dick with some diffidence.

"What do you imagine, Dick—could interest her—in an Australian paper?"

"Why, the chance of hearing something about you," Erridge made answer, boldly.

For a moment Summers looked bewildered: then he said, almost with a frown—

“No, no! That is impossible. That is all done with. She would not be thinking about me. I told her to go her own way, and leave me alone. Bluntly enough I told her—bluntly enough.” And yet—somehow—he did not throw aside this worthless scrap of brown paper. He smoothed it, rather; and folded it; and eventually, when Dick wasn’t looking, placed it in his pocket-book. Here, indeed, was another talisman to summon up visions and dreams—when he was far away on the black-heaving waters.

That afternoon, as the dusk was coming down, these two were in Mr. Summers’s lodgings; and he was seated at a table, with a number of written pages before him; while Dick stood before the fire, the inevitable cigarette between his fingers.

“This is a letter,” Mr. Summers was saying, “which I have been trying to put together; and I hope to give it over to your keeping before I sail on Friday. I’m

not used to such things ; I may have to write it all over again, if I can find the time——”

“ I’m going down to Plymouth with you, you know,” the other interposed.

“ Will you really ? That’s like you, Dick. Well, this is a letter for Nan ; and you are not to take it to her or send it to her unless you hear that something has happened to me. My tether isn’t likely to be a long one ; anyhow, I rely on you, Dick, to keep this letter until you hear that it’s all over with me ; then you can give it to her—but not till then. For the fact is, I didn’t see any use in her believing all her life through that I was really impatient with her at Crowhurst, and that I left because I was tired of the place ; and this is a kind of confession. I have been thinking over one or two little things : now, for example, her getting those Australian papers—I have been thinking she might not be so angry with me, after all—for she’s a queer kind

of creature—very generous and forgiving ; and I would like to be set right with her, when no harm can be done. It's a difficult business—I've been at it two or three nights—to get everything clear——”

He took up these sheets, and was soon lost in the contemplation of them ; for it was as if he were speaking to Nan. He studied phrases and passages here and there, to make sure that she could not fail to understand his meaning.

‘ . . . For it's the real truth that is in this letter. And it never was true that I got tired of Crowhurst, or of the way we lived there ; no, indeed ; it was a proud and happy time for me ; and I wished it could have gone on for ever. But it was only a trial, after all ; and I knew that in any case my time would probably be short ; so when I saw the chance of your being well and happily settled, you may be sure I welcomed it. And then I came to see that it would be easier for you, it would

make it smoother for you with all of the Hume family, if I was out of the way ; and that is why I pretended to be tired of Crowhurst, and left you free to choose your own friends ; so that everything should go well ; but now I want you to know the truth, and this letter will not be delivered until it's all over with me, so that no harm can be done to any one, and you need not worry. . . . That is what I most want to say, dear Nan, that you need not in any way grieve about me, whatever may have happened when you get this letter ; for even within these last three weeks I have received far more happiness than any human being deserves, much less one like me. All these three weeks I have been in Worthing, seeing you every day, sometimes twice or thrice a day ; and the boy, too ; and the delight when I saw you—but I cannot write about it. I was quite close by you, many a time, at the end of the pier. Sometimes I could hear a few words when you were passing ; and you

may imagine what that sound was to me after being so long away. I say again that I don't believe any human being ever deserved to have three weeks of such splendid happiness, much less me; so there's nothing for you to be sorry about, Nan; I've had my day, and am more than content, as well I might be. . . . There's another thing that I've spoken to you about before. You must show yourself considerate with your husband's family; not proud and independent, even though your husband himself should be inclined to back you up in that; for it's a difficult thing for people to give up their prejudices; and you ought to be grateful, instead of independent. It will be the best in the long run; and it always was easy for you to be friendly; it will be easier than keeping up any family division. You must look to them now. Here's Dick trying to make me believe that the Australian paper you were reading on the pier was because you sometimes had

a thought for your poor old Dodo; and if it was so, that's very kind of you, Nan; and the naming of the boy—if I'm not too presumptuous in guessing—that was another thing made me wonder whether you were so very vexed with me because of the way I left you at Crowhurst. But it's to them you must turn now; and be grateful for civil treatment, that is the least you can do. . . . And now, my dear brave lass, this is to say good-bye, from whatever quarter it may come to you. . . .'

He put the leaves a little way aside, and looked up. His eyes seemed somewhat tired.

"Did you say you were going with me down to Plymouth, Dick?" he asked.

"Certainly," was the prompt answer. "Ay, and if it weren't for the grumbling of the old grandfather, I'd go all the trip out with you. Well, we'll maybe meet under the Southern Cross again—and that not so long away."

“I’ll give you the letter on the Saturday morning,” said Mr. Summers, absently, “whether I alter any of it or not. Perhaps Nan will understand it as it is.” And therewith he put the sheets in an envelope, and placed that in his travelling-bag. At the same moment the landlady came in with the lamp. And that was a signal and a summons; for this was the hour at which he was used to wander along to West Worthing, on the chance of getting a glimpse of Nan through the newly-lit windows.

The darkness of night had fallen; the streets were almost deserted; in the distance they could hear the sullen moan of the Channel. Both men walked for the most part in silence; for there were many things to think of, in view of the imminent leave-taking at Plymouth. Yet the elder of these two was in no sombre mood.

“It won’t be so bad, Dick, going away this time,” he said, presently. “For I’ve

seen with my own eyes that everything is happily fixed with Nan; and I'm taking away with me whole heaps of fine things to think over. I wish I could give a sovereign to the girl who brings the lamps into Nan's dining-room; she hardly ever lets down the blind—at least not until they're seated at the table; very kind of the wench—if she only knew."

As they drew near the house, they went forward with greater caution; but indeed there was no one about; and when at length they ventured right up to the low wall, they could survey both house and garden without any fear of detection, for they were effectually screened by the hedge of tamarisk. As yet the dining-room window was dark: the lights were all on the upper floor. But as they waited, the black panes were suddenly changed to a dull yellow: a servant-maid had brought in a lamp, which she placed on the table. She went away and returned with another:

there was now quite a cheerful glow in the room. And so far as they could make out—for they were looking at an upward angle, and from some little distance—she forthwith proceeded to lay the dinner-things; while, having no fear of being spied upon in this secluded neighbourhood, she had omitted to let down the blind.

She left the room again. By-and-by there was the scound of a gong. Presently there appeared four young, or youngish, people, who entered in an informal sort of way—talking and laughing to each other, in fact—and took their places: Nan coming up to the hither end of the table, so that, when she sate down, with her back to the window, all that her father could see of her, in the light of the lamp, was the outline of her cheek and a soft aureole round her hair.

“Another picture!” he exclaimed, in whispered exultation. “Another picture to take away with me! Dick, my lad,

I've had some luck—I've had some luck this trip, and no mistake ! ”

“ But, I say, what's that going on over there ? ” Dick made answer, also in an undertone.

His eyes had not been so much engrossed as those of his companion. He had chanced to descry, at the further end of the garden, and by the darkened side of the house, the dusky figure of a man who came cautiously over the low wall—parting a way for himself through the tamarisk shrubs—and who then peered warily around. The end of a ladder next appeared, being pushed over from the adjacent garden ; and finally, when the ladder had been hauled through, a second figure followed. All this had been but dimly visible ; for the only light anywhere reaching this part of the premises was that of a gas-lamp in the public roadway, and that was some distance off.

“ Why, they're thieves ! ” said Dick, in

great excitement. "By the living Jingo, we'll nab them!"

"Nonsense, nonsense!" Mr. Summers said, impatiently—for he was loth to have to take away his eyes from that glorified window, even for a moment. "They're workmen!"

"They're not workmen!" Dick insisted—and it was well that his vehemence was drowned by the roar of the surge along the distant beach. "Look at them—they're taking off their boots! They're good, honest crib-crackers, and they'll have that ladder up against the balcony in another minute. Look at them sneaking down under the bushes—come along, man!—the Johnnies have no idea what an awful hole they've got into this journey!"

But Summers shrank back.

"No, no," he said. "There might be a noise; the people would come out from the house; and Nan would find me here. No, no; let the fellows take a few candlesticks

or things—what's the difference! Or we can walk down to the sea-front, and send along a couple of policemen——”

He suddenly stopped—and his voice altered.

“Dick,” said he, as if in breathless dismay, “if they were to get into the house—if Nan were by chance to go up to her room—why, the fright might kill her! The fright—might kill her.” And then he instantly added, between his teeth: “By God, they shall not get into the house!”

“Then come round by the other garden,” Dick said, as they hurriedly left their ambush. “They may have put wires across the lawn. We will follow in just where they led.”

It was a matter of little difficulty: their swift movements were completely screened by the wall and the hedge and the row of young trees. Then, when Summers slipped over, the first thing he saw was that the ladder had been placed against the

dark balcony, and that one of the men was already half way up, while his accomplice waited to see him gain the iron rail before also ascending. And little did this latter guess the fate that was now behind him. With a bound as of a wild beast on its prey Summers was upon him, and down he went, with two strenuous hands fixed in his throat.

“ Here, Dick—pin him!—bash his head if he stirs—I’ll get the other one in a minute.”

But by this time the other scoundrel had gained the balcony, and was now looking down on the capture of his companion, while as for himself he was caught like a rat in a trap—unless, indeed, he dared to risk the hold of certain euonymus bushes trained up against the wall. And here was his pursuer mounting the ladder—a little way up—half way up : then the hunted man, as a last desperate device, caught the end of the ladder, and with all his might threw it

from him : for a second it hung and swayed, then it went over, falling heavily, with Summers underneath. This was the crash that startled those within : Sidney and Stephen Weguelin came rushing out, to see what had happened.

They found Dick Erridge kneeling by a prostrate and senseless body—the two thieves he had thought nothing more of when he saw his friend hurled down.

“Are you hurt, old chap?” he was asking. “Not badly, do you think?”

There was no answer.

“We must carry him in-doors,” Dick said ; and as they proceeded to do so, he gave a word of explanation. “There were two men trying to break into the house—he was afraid his daughter might come upon them—and we attempted to get hold of them. Don’t tell her, if you can help it—he would rather not have her know he was here——”

But this was Nan herself who was at the

head of the steps ; and it was with a piteous cry of anguish she recognised the sad burden they bore into the hall ; and it was with wringing hands she followed them into the room. They laid him on a couch.

“Dodo, you have come back to me!—say you have come back to me!” she cried, and she clung to the impassive fingers that hung helpless.

There was no reply from the death-like, ashen-gray face and the pallid lips. And meanwhile confusion prevailed in the house—one running for brandy—another sending off for a doctor, and the like ; but Nan took no heed of such things—she only continued her despairing appeal—with agony in her voice :

“Dodo, won’t you speak to me ! It’s Nan ! It’s Nan that’s beside you ! Dodo, can’t you hear me !—it’s Nan—it’s Nan that’s talking to you !——”

And at last he moved slightly—slightly,

and heavily, and wearily ; and his left hand travelled slowly up to his heart, where it lay half-clenched. Then for a space there was silence and short, difficult breathing. When finally he managed to open his eyes, it was Nan's eyes he found fixed on his—so eager, so imploring, so full of the old affection and companionship and gratitude.

“Your bull-dog, Nan,” he struggled to say, with something of a forced smile, “has been—hard hit—this time——”

“But you’ve come back to me, Dodo!—you’ve come back to me!—you’re not going away any more!——”

“There’s a letter,” he said, obviously with great exertion, “—Dick will give it to you—I never was tired—of Crowhurst——”

Suddenly his face altered—he drew a short, quick, gasping breath—and the next second they saw that all was over—all of them, that is to say, but Nan, who did not seem to realise what had happened

until her husband gently raised her and led her, half-unconscious, from the room.

When Sidney returned, Dick Erridge was still standing by the side of the couch, crying like a child.

“There’s the best friend I ever had,” he said, when he had mastered himself somewhat. “And the straightest man that ever breathed. . . . I’ll bring you the letter, either to-night or to-morrow morning, whichever you like. But mind you tell her this. No man knew her father, and his ways of thinking, better than I did ; and I know that this is the very end he would himself have chosen. You tell her that. I was in Australia with him. Many a night we sate up talking on the voyage out ; and over there too ; and I know what he was thinking. He guessed that his time was about drawing near a close ; and if he had had his choice of every way, this is the end he would have chosen. You tell her that. And tell her he has been

down here for some weeks, and just as happy as he could be in seeing her from time to time. You never saw a man so delighted. He just lived for her——”

“And died for her, too, as it would seem,” Nan’s husband said. And there-with came the ringing of a bell, and a knock at the outer door. It was the doctor who had arrived.

THE END.

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